ver-i-si-mil-i-tude: appearance of truth; the quality of seeming to be true or real

"A dead butterfly. Fallen Frangipani flowers. Counterfeit artworks. They all look vibrant, alive and enigmatic. And they all make promises that they can't fulfil. In VERISIMILITUDE the protagonist discovers that love is expertly reproduced, word for word, sigh for sigh, like the ubiquitous elephant figurine in the bazaar. In Thailand, love is sold on a stick, seasoned with sugar and spice and lightly roasted by flames leaping about like the forked tail of the devil. Caveat Emptor."

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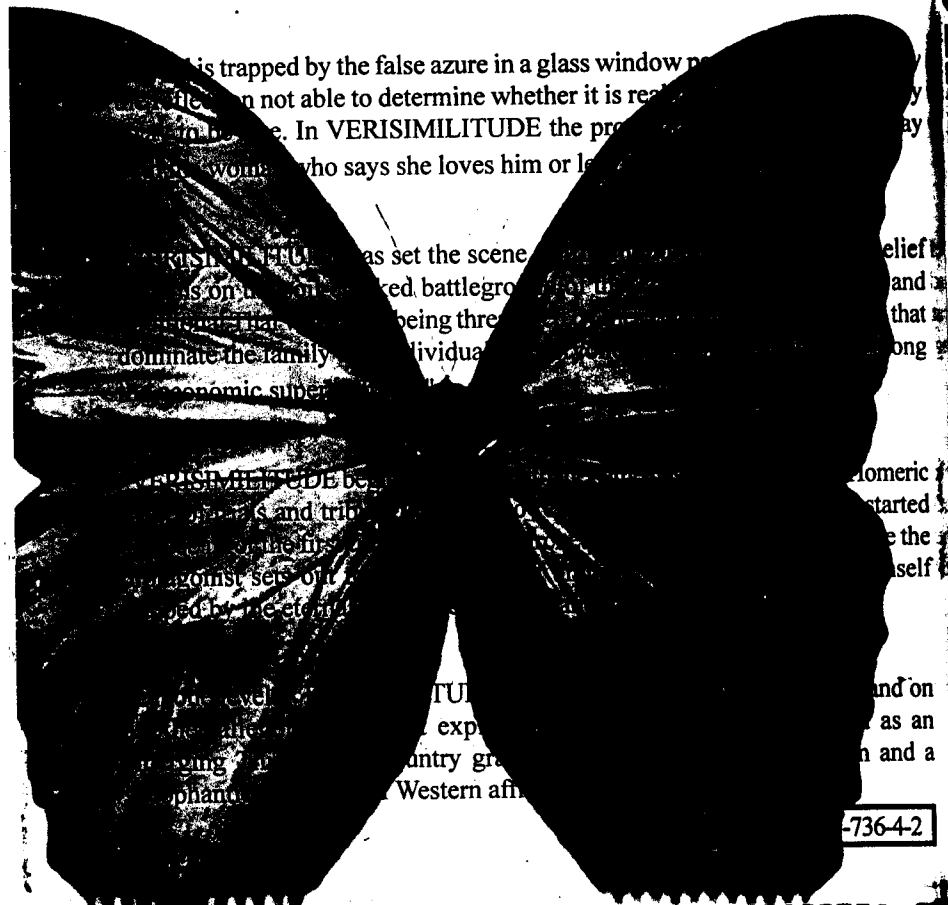

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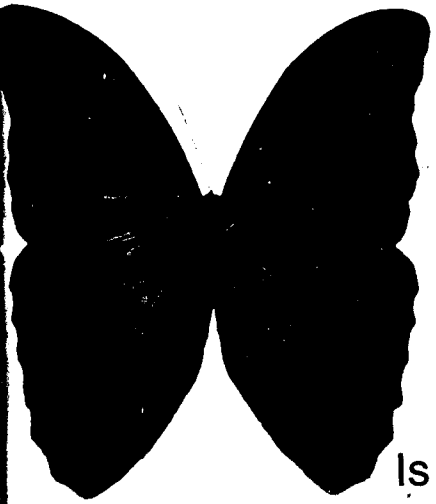

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a novel by Harry Nicolaides

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"VERISIMILITUDE is an undisguised bold-faced assault on Thailand's presentation culture and its rank obsession with the appearance of truth and the semblance of reality. The truth is a casualty in a climate of political chicanery, expedient educational practices, routine self-aggrandisement and wholesale conformity. A post-modern, allegorical twist on the timeless fable of The Emperor's New Clothes. Nothing is as it appears. Trust your instincts!"

"Thailand and America have had close relations since the end of the Second World War and the defeat of the Japanese. During the 1960's large US airfields and military installations were developed in Thailand to thwart the spread of communism in South East Asia. In the book, VERISIMILITUDE, Harry Nicolaides contends that the USA is still in Thailand today advancing the interests of economic imperialism at the expense of cultural integrity and diversity."

"VERISIMILITUDE has set the scene for the monumental struggle of belief systems on the soil-cracked battleground of the Third World. Buddhism and traditional Thai values are being threatened by the commercial imperatives that dominate the family and

individual as everyone is swept up by the race along the economic superhighway."

"The American soldiers may have left Thailand after the Vietnam War but today, in VERISIMILITUDE, they have been replaced by hyperbolic Evangelical missionaries, church planting with George Bush's money. This is the new face of the foot soldiers of American foreign policy in South East Asia."

"Domination and control – these are the objectives of the new American religious right wing together with the subtle stratagems of manipulation administered by Republican administration in the USA that VERISIMILITUDE identifies with lacerating insight. In Thailand, they have infiltrated schools and universities to influence the content of educational curriculums to transmit their hidden agenda while the local authorities receive massive financial grants in exchange for their collusion."

"Polygamy, indentured servitude and the sexual exploitation of women flourish in Thailand under an oppressive patriarchal social system. In VERISIMILITUDE, the impunity of the nation's ruling elite stands unchallenged by the lower classes who imitate, like grotesque acolytes, the predilections and peccadillos of their rulers."

"Tell the tailors to tie a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch – The nefarious incarnation of Dr Jekyl was Tom Hyde. He spoke these enigmatic words standing on the gallows to hang. VERISIMILITUDE puts Thailand on trial revealing that in Thailand it is more important to save face than tell the truth. The book also examines the consequences of a policy of being expedient with the facts."

"VERISIMILITUDE begins and ends with the same passage in what is a Homeric cycle of trials and ribulations only to return to the place the journey started and see it for the first time. This is the archetypal Odyssean journey where the protagonist sets out to achieve modest ambitions but instead finds himself trapped by the eternal paradoxes of love and identity."

"On one level, VERISIMILITUDE is a tale of a tortured relationship and on another allegorical level it explores the development of Thailand as an emerging Third world country grappling with corruption, nepotism and a sycophantic adoration of Western affluence and materialism."

"VERISIMILITUDE asks the most important question of our age – to what degree is the world we see around us a projection of our prejudices, beliefs and language and of the two worlds we inhabit – the reflection in the glass pane and the world beyond the glass – which is 'reality'. In Thailand image is reality."

"VERISIMILITUDE ends how it begins – decidedly ambiguous. Each reader will project their own values on a textual surface that is subject to multiple interpretations. The reader is drawn into the author's obsession to explore the mysterious relationship between empirical truth and social constructs and the interplay between light and shadow."

"A bird is trapped by the false azure in a glass window pane. It is transfixed by the reflection not able to determine whether it is real or not. The bird must fly away to be free. In VERISIMILITUDE the protagonist must choose to stay with the woman who says she loves him or leave her, to be free."

"A dead butterfly. Fallen Frangipani flowers. Counterfeit artworks. They all look vibrant, alive and enigmatic. And they all make promises that they can't fulfil. In VERISIMILITUDE the protagonist discovers that love can be expertly reproduced, word for word, sigh for sigh, like the ubiquitous elephant figurine in the bazaar. In Thailand, love is sold on a stick, seasoned with sugar and spice and lightly roasted by flames leaping about like the forked tail of the devil. Caveat Emptor."

"The grim reality about generational debt bondage in the Third World and the enslavement of Thai women into the sex industry are revealed in VERISIMILITUDE. Towns in Northern Thailand whose populations have been decimated by the AIDS virus have been left as dustbowls littered with orphans, widows and stray dogs. This is the horror of the truth not dissembled by politicians, deconstructed by academics or finessed by journalists."

"I am the shadow of the waxwing slain, that has flown against the false azure of my window pane."

– John Shade in Nabokov's Palefire.

Chapter One

A serendipitous turn from the highway, between the forested mountain township of Prae and the sweeping outskirts of Chiang Rai, at an unmarked junction, the road spilled into a small, unsurfaced corollary glowing with a burning orange dust. Golden corn stalks, ablaze with colour like fiery torches, marked the periphery of green and yellow rice paddies. Water flowed slowly through narrow, man-made canals to verdant pastures. Open grasslands stretched towards the horizon. In the west, a mountain range overhung the lowlands like an imposing wall. Great swathes of land below were inter-woven like pieces of an immense tapestry. Rich bands of colour through the fields reflected the changing seasons. The road poured into the landscape like a river, constantly rising and falling over hills, crisscrossing hundreds of minor

tributaries, through ravines and across fields to take Savvas to a place he never expected to find himself.

Nestled in the undulating hills, somewhere north of the past and south of the future, was the small village of Nongpakjig. Like a small flower on the side of the road, this quaint little township bloomed with colour and life. It had the surreal look of a place that seemed to have sprouted out of the ground with the gourds, green beans and cabbages that grew abundantly in Northern Thailand. The eternal landscape around the village took on a different complexion at different times of the day. At dawn it was still and clear, at midday bleak and dull and in the afternoon intricate and profound. In this perfect tableau, as the kaleidoscope of colours turned with the hours of the day, it seemed as if Nongpakjig would vanish by sunset and emerge again only after a thousand years.

Blessed were the few who fell through the cracks of the temporal world into this enchanted landscape. Situated beside a narrow canal, it would be easy to drive straight past it. Large sprawling trees camouflaged the town and its houses from the road. Only the glowing sun-struck teakwood beams on homes rising like tree houses revealed the existence of a community beyond the twilight shadows and shifting branches. The laughter of children and the fuel-spluttering crackle of an old motorcycle also

belied the presence of inhabitants.

Savvas' first visit to Nongpakjig was a sentimental one. He seemed inexorably drawn there, as if he was following the latitude and longitude lines carved into the palms of his hands. Nongpakjig was where his girlfriend, Prisana lived. In fact, it was where she was born, went to school and matured as a young woman. Her family lived in a cavernous wooden house elevated on stilts, a dog-leg turn away from the unmade road.

The house was set amongst a thicket of trees and shrubs. A rickety picket fence, so old it looked like it was grafted onto kindred trees when they were mere saplings and rose up with them over the years, marked the boundaries of her family estate. At the entrance to thewinding driveway were flowers bursting in profusion with colour and fragrance. Prisana planted the flowers when she was a little girl. She sprinkled the seeds into the rich soil.

The family house was open to a large natural courtyard. Another semi-detached structure was used to store rice for the long months after the harvest. Nearby was a water-well made from rough-hewn mountain rocks. It featured a wooden, overarching hoist and a peaked, stone-tiled gable. It was hemmed by tussocks of grass.

An old bullock cart languished under a Tamarind tree overgrown with creeping weeds. Sunlight poured through the canopy above, dappling the ground with medallions of gold. The green foliage of undergrowth and shrubbery bristled with teeming insect life. Brilliantly coloured butterflies zigzagged through honeycombed tree hollows while dragonflies darted above. The winking glint of tremulous leaves beckoned towards a water-well.

They arrived at night after a long, arduous road trip across Thailand from the island of Phuket. They planned to stay in a hotel somewhere in town but they couldn't resist the spontaneous joy of taking the road to Prisana's home for a nocturnal and nostalgic peep at her family homestead. She reeled with surprise as the car jostled, like a colt, towards the faint lantern-lights of her house. This was her return home after ten years of being away. While she had made periodic visits home before, this journey represented the end of one phase of her life and the beginning of another.

Coming to the canal, the lights from her house were much clearer. Savvas and Prisana stopped momentarily, looked at each other and then Savvas pushed the gear stick into first and released the clutch. The car jolted forward and they crossed the footbridge. Prisana grasped Savvas' arm and whined with bittersweet expectation.

They turned into the driveway and rolled into the open courtyard where her family and friends were gathered.

Prisana leapt out of the car and sung her greeting to a chorus of endearing, heartfelt sighs and smiles. Her brothers embraced her while she moved towards her aged mother who was seated. Her father emerged from inside, his mouth widening into a smile. He tilted his head and looked at Prisana. She looked longingly at him, and smiled. Her cousins, nephews and nieces clamoured around her and she was turned and tickled by laughter and love in a merry-go-round of family fun. Prisana called to Savvas as he walked towards the gathering and introduced him to her father. He took Savvas' hand and shook it with stoic restraint. This was the first time they had met. Savvas was introduced, in turn, to Prisana's mother, brothers and relatives. They gathered like moths under the lights outside her house and laughing and lingering until late.

The next morning Prisana took Savvas on the back of a motorcycle to see the surrounding area. They meandered through the labyrinthine paths and tracks of her village passing many proud and erect Thai-style wooden houses elevated on stilts. Children played while elderly men and women reclined in the shade of large Tamarind trees. Occasionally, a dog raced up beside the

motorcycle only to lose interest when they reached the next street. It seemed Prisana was acquainted with all the charming inhabitants of Nongpakjig as person after person, young and old, stopped to greet them.

The motorcycle bounced over the rocky surface of the unmade road. They passed the village market consisting of several vegetable and dried goods vendors under makeshift stalls held together with bamboo, rope and tin. An ancient temple was half-concealed by a majestic tree with branches heavy with years and roots bursting and buckling out of the ground like a gigantic serpent. In fact, the entire village gave him that feeling - the brevity of life crumbling like temple ruins before the immensity of time. Death was omnipresent. Crematorium chimneystacks puffed black plumes into the sky. The evidence of decay and decrepitude was everywhere and undisguised. Every now and then they would pass homes where widows and orphans lived alone.

They returned to Prisana's family home where her father had invited a village spiritual figure to conduct a coming home ceremony. Steeped in tradition, the ritual involved Prisana and Savvas. The two of them were connected with a long piece of cotton thread. The thread was looped around their wrists and then held by the spiritual figure. A dusty old book was opened and an

arcane incantation was murmured by the spiritual figure while Savvas and Prisana sat solemnly and listened.

The spiritual figure presented an offering of food and water to the spirits in a token gesture of deference. He then took a handful of rice grains and dropped a small measure of them into a large banana leaf. Prisana's father counted the grains and the spiritual figure wrote the number into his book with an old pencil. The whole ritual was inscrutable to Savvas. Savvas imagined that the old men were bargaining with the fates and hoped their negotiations were going favourably!

The day ended around a roaring fire in the open courtyard of Prisana's house with relatives, friends, and people passing by joining in the revelry. Grilled chicken and sticky rice was prepared and served with a moonshine whisky, distilled in the local barber shop by ne'er-do-wells and bought for five Baht a cup by workmen returning from a long days job. As a special visitor, Savvas was the subject of many toasts and salutations and was expected to make a few himself. The moonshine whisky was positively shattering! Skyrockets were ignited for the amusement of the children under a glittering, star-spangled firmament. They retired early as they had arranged to go fishing the following day.

Chapter Two

The fish leapt up out of the water flashing luminously and dived back into the water. Another fish rose out of the depths to weave through the air and drop back into the lake. Two more fish launched straight up, only to plunge forcefully back into the body of water below. One fish rose with immense power to project itself over several metres, creating an iridescent arc, lingering like a brief, delicate rainbow, in its wake. Elsewhere, small herringbone fins rippled the surface of the lake. More fish lunged up to touch the sky and then crashed back into the lake. The splashing cacophony of rising and falling fish grew until it looked like it was raining fish.

Each year, in late December, hundreds of villagers

gathered at a small lake to catch fish that had been spawning all year round. The fish were introduced into the lake twelve months earlier and the lake remained undisturbed for the same period of time. The night before the official harvesting of fish, guards were posted around the lake to ensure that a semblance of fairness was created. A fire was lit and bottles of moonshine swilled by the warm glow of a crackling fire. The men sat and talked while fiery splinters shot off into the purple twilight and the glowing white thread of a falling star unravelled the black, velvety, night sky.

The dawn over the lake was a revelation. Thousand of villagers gathered around the banks of the lake. The surface of the water was littered with makeshift rafts. Hundreds of villagers were submerged in the water. They wielded large nets, held together with flexible bamboo poles, to catch fish. The nets were constructed to billow outwardly, like overturned canvas tents. Others preferred to use smaller, sleeve-shaped pouches that were manipulated under the water to envelop the fish. There was always a congenial atmosphere throughout the whole day among the villagers. Each villager manoeuvred themselves and their net to a place in the lake that was not occupied by others. They submerged their net and waited for fish to swim into the targeted zones.

After about thirty minutes the nets were raised and dozens of fine specimens were placed into hand-woven wicker baskets strapped to their bodies. The nets were submerged in the water again and the routine wait for fish to swim into the nets began again. According to local folklore, some men had the spellbinding ability to mesmerise fish with song. These men used their hands like a divining rod with fish swimming into their grasp drawn by the compelling magnetism of an age-old incantation.

Throughout the year the villagers ensured that the lake's delicate ecology was not disturbed by contamination or cyclical drought. Water was pumped into the lake through a channel that wound through nearby rice fields. This way, the level of the water was consistent and the habitat of the fish was preserved. All villagers seemed to have observed the moratorium on fishing from the lake. The villagers of Nongpakjig had cultivated time management like they grew vegetables. They understood the relationship between time and the fundamental elements of the natural world. This insight allowed them to harness the power of nature with the yoke of raw-boned peasant tenacity and unblinking faith.

An old woman, waist deep in muddy water, held a fish up like a piece of the rainbow. Shimmering with sunlight, she raised her prize in her hand to display it

triumphantly to onlookers. The hundreds of other men and women in the lake were heartened by her luck. They cussed in amazement until another triumphant scream shattered the expectant mist shrouding the lake. Another man emerged from the muddydepths, water dripping off his sinewy body, gripping a fish in each hand. At a corner of the lake a net was raised laden with fish gleaming like gigantic jewels. Hundreds of makeshift rafts bobbed and bounced as nets were hauled up to spill out their bountiful harvests.

Prisana and Savvas stood by the banks of the lake and marvelled at the spectacle. An old man looked up at Savvas and began muttering something. It was incomprehensible to Savvas. "Prisana," motioned Savvas. "The chap next to me is trying to say something to me, I think." The old man continued as Savvas and Prisana looked at him earnestly and occasionally nodded. Savvas raised his eyebrows and looked at Prisana again. "What did he say?"

Prisana reflected for a few seconds on the man's comments. She adjusted her glasses by pressing them onto her nose and then raised her hand to shade her eyes from the sun. "He is talking about fishing." Prisana hesitated while she thoughtfully considered the man's words. "He said that animals caught without

hook or trap taste better than those that experience the trauma of violent death . Fishing in Nongpakjig, like many small villages in Northern Thailand, does not involve the use of steel hooks."

Savvas considered what Prisana said. "It's quite clever really. The fish have swum into the large pouch-shaped nets and are trapped - but they don't know it until they try to swim out."

"Yeah and because they do not experience pain or trauma they taste better," said Prisana.

"For a time the fish move into the nets believing they will find food. They are tricked and drawn along by their own instincts," added Savvas.

Prisana looked back towards the lake surveying the spectacle. "They are not familiar with nets. They do not recognise the danger they present."

"Do you think fish can sense danger?" asked Savvas.

"Why not? Other animals do."

"Then why do they swim into the nets?"

"They don't know they are nets Savvas."

"I think they may sense danger but the instinct to eat is overwhelming."

"Do you think they take a calculated risk?" asked Prisana.

No, Savvas thought. They are completely governed by biological imperatives - to eat, reproduce and survive. They do not have any choice. If the fish had any consciousness, they may think they exercise choice and they would bend the known world to conform to their self-serving hypotheses. That's what human beings do."

"Do you feel Hungry Savvas? Perhaps we should go home now."

"Sure, lets go."

Savvas got up early the next day and made a cup of tea. He watched the water boil in the electric water pot. Steam poured out of the top and the pot shook as the water reached boiling temperature. He carefully placed the tea bag into his cup and poured the water out of the pot until the tea bag was completely infused by the water. He allowed the tea bag to sit in his cup for at least four minutes. He then removed the tea bag and

added sugar. He stirred until curling wisps of steam rose into the air. He let the tea sit for another two minutes before raising the cup to his lips. He saw profound shades of meaning in those lingering formations.

A bird appeared in the window. It looked trapped within the perpendicular realm of the square window frame. The bird shifted back and forth, side to side, in front of the window, perplexed by the verisimilitude of the reflected sky. The bird loomed larger, momentarily, when it appeared to move forward into the glass pane but then shrunk again as it reeled itself back when it got close. The bird was, for a time, beguiled by the reflection.

Swords of light plunged through the cracks between the beams of wood that formed the walls of the house, and slay the nimble shadows of night. Savvas pressed the wooden window shutter open and inhaled the fresh breath of morning. He showered and dressed. Prisana slumbered in bed. He looked briefly at her undulating shape beneath the mosquito net. He quietly pushed the bedroom door closed.

Savvas surreptitiously gathered his clothes and folded then neatly into a pile. He gazed at the bookshelf and selected only the few books he held a special affinity for. He had not unpacked his teaching notes

and so just lifted the plastic container from the ground and took it out to his jeep. The clothes and books followed until just his overnight bag remained on the floor of the old house. He lifted the strap of his bag over his head and let it rest on his shoulder. He thought about leaving a note but then recoiled from the idea. After all, he thought, they had spoken enough words and in the final analysis it made no difference.

What he felt was beyond words. It was words that had clouded his judgement. It was all the words he expressed to Prisana and all the words she had expressed to him. It was the words spoken and not spoken by others. Even Savvas' thoughts were contaminated by words. He was trapped by the words that created meaning and reality for the whole world. The history of advertising slogans, political mantras, academic traditions and religious dogma had become the looking glass of language. He moved stealthily outside and sat still in his jeep. He reflected deeply for a while, looking through the glass windshield. Something was different, something had changed.

Chapter Three

Two years earlier, travelling from Bang Tao bay on the north-western coast of the Island of Phuket, towards Patong, the main tourist precinct, Savvas' jeep was thrust into one of the many treacherous turns that characterise the mountainous peninsula to confront a small crowd gathered on the side of the road. An ominous balloon of smoke hung perfectly still over the mangled wreckage of a Honda Dream motorcycle. A spoked wheel was spinning with an unspooling whirr, weaving a web of interest for the few Thais who were drawn to the scene. The engine creaked with pain as it haemorrhaged fuel onto the bitumen. The pieces of a crushed mobile phone littered the road. Many more vehicles passed the scene, some slowing to gawk while most continued blithely on. Above and beyond the steel barrier, two feet down an

embankment, lay the prostrate body of a young Thai girl. She was gasping for air and spluttering blood from her mouth. The colour of her blood was the same as the vermilion-coloured flower that flourishes on the escarpments and in the ravines of mountainous Phuket and is as prolific as violent death is on the island. A farang, as the local Thais called foreigners, stooped over the girl desperately imploring someone to call an ambulance. He was her passenger.

The small crowd moved on from their curious fascination with the steaming, mangled heap of steel to soon disperse. Before they walked away, some of the locals turned to give the dying girl a momentary look. The tuk-tuk drivers scurried off in fear of being commandered without remuneration to transport the young girl to hospital. Twenty aching minutes later, a solitary policeman on a four-wheeled lunar buggy arrived. The girl was dead. She was one of thousands of young girls who worked as prostitutes in the bars in the tourist zones of Phuket.

From a distance the island was an emerald jewel in the Andaman Sea. Patong, the main tourist precinct, was a blend of the beautiful and the bizarre. Every single evening, plugged in at about six o'clock, Patong lit up like a huge pornographic Christmas tree of neon signs,

fairy lights and glittering bar, restaurant and shop frontages. Hundreds of Honda and Suzuki motorcycle scooters lined the streets like a gauntlet. The skyline was a cartoonish junkyard of satellite dishes sitting on dilapidated, crumbling buildings and massive, electronic transformers poised precariously on small wooden telegraph poles.

Corkscrew rods and oily-black discs jutted out from the transformers like the antenna of a gargantuan beetle. A hotch-potch of hybrid vehicles (half Toyota Landcruiser, half Ford Bronco Jeep) crisscrossed through chaotic intersections. A pedestrian crowd of Fellini characters swaggered along the main road on their way to find their place in the sun. The gilt-framed image of the King of Thailand was everywhere. Gilded shrines, large and small, paying homage to Buddha were equally ubiquitous.

The sheer sun-worshipping hedonism that sweated through the voluptuous landscape of white sandy beaches and azure waters during the day gave way in the evening to buttock-slapping, beer swilling debauchery and buccaneer carousing in the hundreds of go-go bars and beer-bars that infested Patong. Freddie's, Manhattan, Crazy Chicken, Milano, Easy, Joe Banana's, Captain Kirks, Paramecia 99, Shipwreck bar, Kangaroo

bar, Sydney bar, Viking Bar, Butterfly bar and Mai Tai bar joined an infamous catalogue of others.

Thousands of young girls postured and preened like incandescent stick insects on stilettos to a swooning parade of Caucasian males. Other girls sat tandem on the back of motor scooters with Western men whose Hawaiian shirts billowed like triumphant flags of sexual conquest while they wove up and down the narrow streets. Peroxided hermaphrodites, transvestites and transsexuals crowed with a seductive, beguiling vulnerability to the passing legions.

This elaborate pantomime was presented nightly from six o'clock and intensified towards the witching hour. The Andaman Queen, a bar on the notorious Bangla Road, throbbed with music while lady-boys swanned and sauntered on tabletops, seducing crowds with their siren songs of androgynous sexuality. Bar girls came and went clasping their hands together and bowing their heads to pay homage to the gilded statuettes of religious figures that formed small wall-mounted shrines in each and every bar.

A woman whose face was lined like a topographical map of Thailand waddled down the street selling Wrigley's stick chewing gum out of a small cardboard box. Wooden carts laden with ice cream, fresh fruit and racks of dried, flattened squid dangling from clothes pegs and

illuminated with garish, fluorescent pink lights, crowded the streets like schools of tropical fish. The smell of crackling corn licked by naked flames filled the air with a palpable sweetness. Secularism and spirituality intertwined like columns of smoke while the open sewers overflowed with the toxic effluent of the Western free market.

The bar girls travelled to Phuket from all regions of Thailand including Bangkok. Most of them were from rural provinces experiencing poverty and came to the island to raise money for their embattled families. All of them were available from one thousand Baht for a period of about twenty-four hours. Two hundred Baht was usually paid to the bar to compensate them for the absence of the girl while the farang paid for all incidental expenses like taxi, food and entertainment. While some freelancers would sell their services for as little as five hundred Baht - or less for specific acts of sexual gratification - these girls usually had acute drug or alcohol dependencies or gambled.

Savvas had heard rumours around the bars that the reason why Thai girls had precocious sexual experience was because their father allocated sexual duties to the eldest daughter when his wife was absent, deceased or convalescing. There were stories of 'chicken

bars' on remote mountain roads and in some of the shanty towns that appeared like barnacles around the industrial bay on the east coast where sex with pre-teens and children was available for even less than that paid to freelancers. These 'snail trails' were followed by web-savvy paedophiles who belonged to worldwide internet associations.

There were also cautionary tales circulating through bars about some farangs who would wake several days after being with a freelancer to find neat little scars on their abdomens where healthy organs had been surgically removed to be sold in the thriving underground market in human organ transplants. As a consolation, it was noted that Thailand was also the best place in the world for getting surgery done with surgeons specialising in appending severed penises.

Other foreigners were more fortunate and had their passports, wallets, money and jewellery stolen or were billed for expensive international calls made from their hotel rooms. Some had money extorted from them to raise a child or facilitate an abortion. When tourist visitation levels to the island were high, usually from November to March, the bargirls made a substantial income. During the low season from April to September other sources of income were sought. The month of April was referred

to by long-term expatriates as the 'thieven season'.

When paradise and all of its carnal temptations became too much Savvas would head down for a good dose of reality at Diver's shore front bar at Surin beach, half way between the venal excesses of Patong and the cocooned six-star resorts of Bang Tao bay. Ian 'Diver' Stuart was a retired lifesaver from Bondi Beach, Australia who became a local legend when he lunged courageously into treacherous waters to save the Life of a Japanese paediatrician swimming at Surin beach. He continued to save lives every day by extending his own unique brand of personal salvation - usually swallowed with lots of cold beer - to the growing legions who gathered each day to exchange ideas, discuss politics, engage in one-upmanship, swim and play football on the beach each Sunday.

Chapter Four

The topography of the island of Phuket was ruggedly mountainous with the flatter expanses covered by open fields while lush foliage formed impenetrable canopies in jungle regions. Large swathes of the island's hinterland were scarred with stalled residential developments. Rubber and coconut plantations lined the roads towards Phuket International airport while private secluded coves with vestal white sands and emerald waters, rippled by the breath of the envious gods, were the playgrounds of the super-rich cognoscenti. The drive to Diver's bar was a good opportunity to enjoy the north-western peninsula of the island. It was March and the high season was coming to an end and it would not be too long before the monsoon rains would start again The long serpentine road faithfully followed the coastline from

Kata bay through Karon, over the hill and down to Patong. The road then graduated slowly higher towards Kamala before descending into the shaded respite of Surin bay.

At Diver's bar Savvas caught up with a few regular habitues. Phuket had a highly transient citizenship. The legions of wayfarers, vagabonds and itinerants littered the roads like windswept potpourri. Occasionally, Savvas met an interesting beggar who had a fantastic tale only to discover later that it was a Billy Wilder screenplay. One of the regulars at Diver's was Simon, a heavily tattooed and opinionated Irish ex-serviceman. He came to the island on a short holiday two years earlier. His car was still parked at Heathrow airport rusting away. Wayne was a wealthy Australian entrepreneur with business interests in Phuket. Dave was a directional driller on an oil rig offshore who rode a monstrous, chrome Harley Davidson. They were all brought together by the heartbreakingly beautiful vista of the Andaman Sea from Diver's bar. It was obligatory to ask permission before taking a group photo of patrons at Diver's bar. Many were officially dead, missing or simply on the run.

'Hi guys, is Diver around?"

"He's out back Savvas. He'll be out in a minute," said Dave.

"Thanks Dave. How is the construction of your villa development going Wayne?"

"Don't ask Savvas. Got burned. Should've known better, you know about doing business in Thailand. Still, we live and learn."

There was a development boom underway on the island. Phuket had increasingly become the lifestyle destination of the rich and famous, replacing traditional resort destinations like the Caribbean, Canary islands and the south of France. Great swathes of the west coast had been bought by international consortiums with a view to constructing swanky resort hotels and landscaped villa estates. Private property developers invested in clearing forbidding escarpments and laying infrastructure to allow for the construction of majestic, Thai-styled bungalows thrust onto the side of mountains like monumental teak-wooded tree houses soaring above the verdant foliage.

For a long time, Singaporean investors and Hong Kong speculators capitalised on the back of the languishing Thai Baht and bought and sold land and homes with unrestrained cupidity. Local real estate agents raised the stakes with sales spiels about unprecedented investment returns from buying land or villas that would undergo vaulting growth in value

over the subsequent years. Prospective international buyers were encouraged to rush down to Phuket to claim their stake in an investment bonanza that had been compared with the Californian gold rush of last century. It was a carnival of greed where many, like Wayne, lost their money.

"Fool's gold, that's what property development is," said Simon. "Every expat whose mother dies and leaves them an old house sells it and comes to Phuket to be a property developer."

"Its all self-fulfilling," added Dave. "The industry feeds on its own hype not recognising that the hype was generated to finesse prospective buyers."

"The early developers made the money," said Wayne. "The other 90 percent struggle to sell what they have built."

"You would have more luck finding the gold of North Sentinel Island," Dave said mockingly.

"You don't really believe that old story do you Dave?" asked Simon.

"It comes up every time the boat regatta is about to start."

There was a small island off the West coast of Phuket that was part of the Andaman Islands archipelago. The indigenous inhabitants - primitive tribesmen - had been completely isolated from the development of modern civilisation. Descendants of the Negroid race, these shadowy islanders had fired the imagination of pirates and contemporary anthropologists for decades. Participants in the seventeen-day Andaman Sea Rally, which started in March, off Kata Beach, were warned to navigate around one tiny island: North Sentinel Island and seek other anchorages instead. The Indian government strictly prohibited visitation to North Sentinel Island. Rumours of a gold-laden Portuguese galleon languishing at the bottom of the sea brought tears to the eyes of crusty old sailors.

Diver emerged from the kitchen. "G'day Savvas. How are you?"

"Relieved to take a break from Patong. You know what it's like."

"Yeah, many blokes get caught up in that scene. Especially with the girls. They are real spiders. Be careful mate."

"How're things down at the language school? Andaman Language School, isn't it?"

"Fairly busy with on-site work and some out-service clients too."

"What's happening down here?"

"We're talking about the boat regatta."

"Held annually isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Departs from Kata?"

"And goes up around the Andaman Islands and back again."

"The Andaman islands?"

"Yeah, two hundred clicks straight out from here."

"Do you believe the gold story Diver?"

"I did until I learned that the island is infested with head-hunters."

"What the fuck are you talking about Diver," shouted Wayne.

"Get off the piss mate," added Simon.

"Fair dinkum guys. I have this on good authority."

North Sentinel Island was in Indian sovereign waters. As a result the Indian government strictly prohibited visitation to the island. This insulated the island and its people from the rest of the world. This isolation made them the embodiment of what people in the West feared most. While it was recognised that the local tribesmen enjoyed many exotic delicacies provided by the sea, including a cornucopia of fruits, there was one insatiable appetite that the local tribesmen had that was an encumbrance on tourism: Cannibalism! Their unbridled blood lust for human flesh was said to flourish as was the totemic practice of devouring the brains of their hapless victims and triumphantly hoisting the hollowed-out head onto a trophy pole consisting of other painstakingly preserved hollow heads.

"I've been close to the islands but never set foot on them. I knew a couple of blokes who swam out there though."

"Really. From where?"

"It was during the regatta last year. Half a dozen boats

were clustered together. The westerly that was blowin' could've put out St Elmo's fire. Anyhow, six boats were very close together. Too close really. Swervin' Mervyn T-boned another yacht like a juggernaut and sent her six feet under into ol' briny."

"The crew?"

"They swam to the shore of one of the islands."

"See any head-hunters?"

"They weren't there very long but they did see lots of human skeletal remains - but all the skulls were missing. Not long after, one of the other boats swung round and picked them up."

The hours of the afternoon were absorbed by many more expatriates who came down to Diver's for a cold beer and to share stories. The conversation always turned back towards opinions about living in Thailand, especially on the island. Prejudice against foreigners, exploitative business practices by the Thais, the duplicitous price scale of food and other consumer goods for foreigners and locals, deception in relationships with Thai women and the many stories of men who became casualties of falling in love with them. Their numbers swelled and Diver's audience grew larger.

Towards twilight, when the fiery tentacles of the sun gave up the glorious remains of the day and the crystalline waters, teeming with marine organisms, glowed with phosphoresce, rambunctious discussions mellowed to a quiet natter. Dark shadows descended while the branches of huge palms gently seesawed. Longtail boats returned to shore and the cacophony of the cicadas began. As the boys at Diver's continued to 'sink the ink' and relate stories about boat races, Savvas smiled and watched the Thai staff bow their heads in deference to the small religious shrine mounted on the wall behind the bar.

Savvas gazed at the fine layers of colour that formed along horizon in the wake of the sunset. They resembled a stack of playing cards, each promising a fresh destiny. He thought about leaving the language school and looking for an appointment at the university on the island. Paradoxically, he learned more about teaching English as a foreign language at the language school than at university but he had had enough. He reflected on the way Thai people graciously accepted the paradoxes of life. He concluded, this was indeed the land of smiles. The people dismissed and disarmed entrenched ideology and religious doctrine with a voluptuous apathy and indifference. This ancient Buddhist culture managed to reconcile the bizarre with the sublime while people in the West saw only conflict and contradiction.

A bargirl in Patong once told him that she had four rooms in her heart. One room was for her family, another room for her self, one for her husband and one for the 'butterfly' or foreigner. Savvas' summer as a 'butterfly' was just about to begin.

Chapter Five

The profession of teaching English abroad attracted the oddest assortment of characters. The flotsam and jetsam of Western civilisation, these ne'er-do-wells washed up on the shoreline of the Third World looking to reinvent themselves like the Count of Monte Cristo or to champion a cause celebre like Lawrence of Arabia. Many of the teachers Savvas met around the expatriate bars and clubs were undischarged bankrupts fleeing creditors, fugitives from justice, unemployed mercenaries, disgraced or convicted malcontents, missionaries, writers-at-large, delinquent and errant husbands, asylum-seekers - and those recently discharged from mental asylums, crusaders and occasionally teachers - with fake university degrees,

of course. This was the state of the industry throughout South America, Polynesia and South East Asia. If you were a foreign teacher in Thailand, you were likely to find yourself sharing an office with Hannibal Lector.

English for these wayfarers was their native tongue. Consequently they drifted into the educational system as a means of earning an income but found themselves doing a lot more. In the past, expatriate teachers were discovered looting national treasures, excavating and smuggling archaeological artefacts, exploiting the indigenous population or establishing private kingdoms with themselves as the self-appointed monarch.

During times of military conflict some were commissioned as intelligence operatives or became correspondents from besieged cities or nations erupting in civil unrest. Later, with an absence of such interesting opportunities, English language teachers abroad had to wage their own war against professional colleagues, exert their own petty tyrannies, explore a malignant neuroses, indulge a private obsession or simply experience the full dress rehearsal of a sordid sexual fetish.

Savvas had heard many stories about different teachers abroad. There were some entrepreneurial teachers like the eccentric Englishman working at a Saudi

university who, by a smuggler's moon, made midnight runs to the border in his Rolls Royce Silver Spirit. His purpose was to collect hundreds of bottles of liqueur and then return furiously across the desert through biblical-sized sandstorms. His illegal cache was distributed judiciously to the underground gin joints that existed in the sprawling catacombs underneath the capital. By day this English teacher was impeccably tailored in Saville-Row finery, had the finesse of a high-class courtesan and the roguish charm of Huck Finn. He was a dashing, dissolute and debauched character whose moral turpitude was one hundred per cent proof. His lessons in teaching prepositions of time and place- 'on' Friday night, 'at' midnight, 'in' the desert - were always very profitable.

A baroque conversation with an American teacher revealed a classical Ivy League education and a fine vaulting intellect - not uncommon for a former US State senator. However, a quip about the human race being a plague on the earth and that only through a systematic program of racial purification would we survive as a species, made Savvas realise the senator was not on a mercy mission in the Third World. After a traditional Thai meal in the shifting shadows of the lights playing on the tarpaulins of the makeshift streetside restaurants they had a few more drinks. The ice cubes in Savvas' glass prompted a conversation about Archimedes and his

observation that a body immersed in fluid is subject to an upward force equal to the weight of the liquid it displaces. Well, Savvas later discovered the good senator's own political career had undergone some displacement.

A powerful conservative senator who was being groomed for the oval office was repeatedly caught and convicted for drunk driving and beating his girlfriend - the newspaper report was scathing! White racists and militia members rallied at his demagogic speeches against minorities and welfare recipients but could not save him from the public trial the newspapers gave him. Halved during his first divorce and quartered at the second divorce he was now teaching English abroad. Profligate and conceited, he was living the life of a libertine to excess.

The senator was to his credit, responsible for pushing through the senate a highly controversial bill to introduce and maintain a public database of previously convicted sex offenders. This would allow the residents of a neighbourhood to know that a convicted sex offender was relocating into to their area and have knowledge of his background. When Savvas met the senator he was still doing research on the subject of sadomasochism and Third World exploitation of go-go dancers. What Savvas thought was a frivolous bum slap with a leather

cat-o-nine tails whip was in fact an empirical observation - slap a girl on the buttocks while she erotically writhes up and down a stage pole and you get her to smile seductively. A form of Archimedes' displacement theory, Savvas mused - the harder you slap the more she smiles!

The senator had since returned to the hustings in the States and had his eyes set on the White House. As it stood he had an impeccable background - Ivy League education, connections with big business, the support of white supremacist groups and a sex scandal involving a ladyboy at the Royal Paradise in Patong who sang the Star-Spangled Banner when they climaxed.

The process of screening applicants for teaching appointments abroad was open to abuse, misunderstanding and identity fraud. Going overseas to work was a convenient way to escape the indiscretions and convictions of a former life in the West. There was a burgeoning demand for native English speakers to teach English in educational institutions at all levels across Thailand. The interview and selection process was the responsibility of non-native speakers and so anyone who looked like a teacher in what was largely a presentation culture was assured employment. While it was well known that fake university and college degrees may have been bought in Bangkok, there were other more elaborate

deceptions that were breathtaking in their audacity.

Savvas knew of the case of the convicted paedophile who secured an appointment at a school in Thailand. He presented his students with a class project where each of them had to develop a photographic portfolio featuring themselves. When students complained of not having an adequate stock of photos he naturally volunteered to take pictures of them at home, the beach or in a sunken, concrete-walled bunker, six-feet under the ground, accessible only by a secret trapdoor in the basement of his home. He fled to a neighbouring country with no standing extradition treaty and continued accumulating photos for his magnum opus - Venus Descending.

It was also rumoured that the Central Intelligence Agency was using the educational system in Thailand to extinguish the resurgence of religious fundamentalism in the South. Muslim extremists presented a danger to the expansion of American foreign policy in the south-east Asian region. The American administration had operatives in schools and universities and in quasi-government organisations. Their objective was to influence the direction and content of curriculums and courses to include academic content that promoted acquiescence and rapacious consumerism. This appetite for Western

products had developed into a cargo cult of consumption with only the vested interests of American businesses being served at the expense of cultural diversity and heritage.

Moreover, in what was an insidious incarnation of Orwellian prophecy, students were nurtured to desire the newfangled American dream that ensured that the American economy grew while the Thai Baht languished in ignominy. Education was so inextricably intertwined with global economics and the hegemonic influences of the mass media that it was hijacked to advance the interests of American imperialism in the New World order. Sex tourists, spies and sadomasochists. These were the undesirables that were teaching in schools and colleges from Bangladesh to Bahrain, Mombasa to Marrrakesh, Penang to Puerto Rico, Bombay to Buenos Aires. Delivering object lessons in treachery, exploitation, psychological manipulation, their skulduggery spread to infest almost every Third world rat hole - in cluding the Andaman Language School.

Savvas arrived early. The language school opened at eight thirty in the morning with classes scheduled at nine. He saw Maxamillian seated at the desk behind the main counter with his legs crossed. He looked the same every single day - blue regulation shirt, bold signature neckties,

pressed trousers and a toupee that was thick, luxuriant and jet black. He had the relaxed manner of old age.

"Hi Maxamillian, how are you?"

"Good morning Savvas. I'm fine and how are you?"

"A little burnt out."

"Are you busy?"

"I only have one student today for a few hours but I have many letters to translate."

That was Maxamillian's speciality - translation. He was eccentric but somehow his ability to speak more languages than anyone else earned him respect. There was a rumour that he was once a high ranking Nazi officer and confidante to Adolf Hitler's personal radiologist. At seventy-five he was old enough to have been around during the Third Reich his imperious presence was resonant of high rank. His knowledge of twentieth century political history was authoritative while his command of German, Greek, Italian, Thai, French, English, Russian, Polish, Egyptian and Swiss was impeccable. Savvas was privy to a meeting Maxamillian thought was private and observed him perform the customary Nazi

military salute when he greeted a German friend. At first Savvas thought it was moment of historical parody but then observed both men deliver the same Nazi salute to each other with triumphant, choreographed precision at their farewell.

Maxamillian was tall, stately and walked with the imperial majesty of a young Caesar. His pot-marked, wrinkled skin sagged with sin. His large forlorn eyes were cesspools. Savvas gazed into them to see the truth as terrifying as it might be. Only fragments of history appeared like the flotsam swirling around the sinking hulk of a large ship. Dark, swirling eyes. Mesmerising. Savvas often thought about informing the many international bodies devoted to finding and bringing to justice the fugitive Nazi war criminals that were still around but Maxmillian was such a benign, likeable old bastard, he thought. The Third World was a safe and remote location to find sanctuary and anonymity.

Curiously by some quirk of fate Maxamillian was still peddling lies, manipulating the truth, contriving elaborate parallel lives and creating misery. He wrote letters for Patong bargirls embroidering a web of lies and half-truths to beguile male Caucasian tourists out of their money. He was an expert at manipulating the feelings and sensibilities of white, middle class men. He had a deep,

penetrating insight into the male psyche and recognised the desire in most men to rescue women from such a nefarious industry.

He elicited sympathy, compassion and moral indignation. He created a feeling of noblesse oblige that drove men to rescue young Thai women from Third World debt and the politics of exploitation. With a deft turn of phrase he aroused patriarchal responsibility in men who had seen several tours of duty as seasoned sex tourists in Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Cambodia. His catalogue of lies was monumental. His stratagems of deceit were well tested. He was a master of persuasion and psychology. After all, his intellectual descendants were all exemplars in their fields.

The plots of the letters were prosaic. Usually someone in the girl's family had had an accident or experienced an illness. Their indisposition had crippled the family's financial health as they were a major source of income or their illness was a significant financial burden. Money was requested. Urgently! Alternatively, livestock illness and death or crop failure, created an immediate and pressing need for financial relief. Sometimes an uncle was rescuing a stranded cat in a tree and inadvertently put his head into a bee's hive. The results were, well, more money was requested of course!

And then there was the request for money to facilitate a visa and passport application for the journey to the native country of the smitten tourist. All of these worked quite well without inducing fear or making threats or the need for the application of more crude stratagems like blackmail and extortion. Vicarious responsibility was not a defence he could invoke for his literary skulduggery but equally Phuket was far from Siberia. He acted with impunity because he could. That is, until a savvy tourist came to see the sick buffalo with his own eyes, interrogated the girl and went looking for Fritz. You couldn't run very fast doing the goose step.

"What will you do?'

"Well, I think I'll apply for full time work at the Prince of Mahidol University. I have been teaching Social Psychology there as a guest lecturer a few hours a week. I know that they have a large English faculty and they will be looking for new teachers to start early next year."

"When does first semester start at the university?"

"June, I think. But they usually appoint teachers earlier so they can prepare their courses. Do you know the university?"

"Yes, I know of it. I tried to get part time work there teaching German but they said I need to have a Bachelor's degree."

"You are the most erudite man I know."

"Yes, and an unabashed auto-didact."

"That's the system I suppose. Most institutions will demand a Bachelor's degree as a minimum qualification. You know that you can pick up a counterfeit degree from Khao Sarn Road, Bangkok?"

"Yes, sure. Counterfeit degrees, phoney visas, forged identification papers, fake driving licences - Khao Sarn Road is famous for these things. However, at my age the names of educational institutions that I may have attended are so obscure that certificate forgeries are impossible to find. It can all unravel if you are not careful."

"Tell the tailors to tie a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch."

"Tom Hyde?"

"Yes - Dr. Jeckyl and Mr Hyde. Tom Hyde was standing on the gallows to be hung and he was asked if he had any last words."

"Was he telling us that lies eventually unravel or come undone?"

"And that leading a double life was difficult. You would require a first class memory to remember all the lies you have told and be consistent."

"He could have been referring to a some poor tailoring he had experienced."

"I suppose you are next going to suggest that Mr Hyde should have invoked the legal defence of vicarious responsibility as it was used at the Nuremburg trials?"

"Well why not - after all Mr Hyde was the alter ego Dr. Jeckyl."

"Are you teaching now?"

"Yes. I have a student in five minutes. I should go."

"See you Savvas."

"Bye Maxamillian."

Chapter Six

At the Prince of Mahidol University, over the mountain from Patong, in the district of Kathu, Prisana had sat in the staff meeting expecting to patiently listen to Ajarn Benjawan discuss the allocation of workload in the second semester to begin in October. It was still early July and the first semester had been underway for about a month. Prisana was pleasantly surprised to see the new almond-eyed Italian teacher, Georgio Fandango. She had been privvy to his CV and knew his girlfriend would be joining the university as the new Spanish teacher in September, a month before second semester would begin.

His exotic Mediterranean appearance and mellifluous speaking voice immediately transfixed Prisana.

His tailoring was decidedly Continental and gave him a finesse seldom seen in the expatriate ranks of teachers abroad. He was tall and dark with a haughty posture. The few Italians she had met were unsavoury and corpulent beach habitues who lingered in the sun and leered obscenely at women. These ageing Lotharios looked pathetic beside the young dark-skinned Thai girls whom they engaged as rented girlfriends for the duration of their holidays on the island. With his crisply pressed, tattersall-check shirt and burnished leather shoes, Georgio had the appearance of someone who had enjoyed the ministrations of a doting girlfriend.

During a break in the meeting Prisana walked to the refreshments table where Georgio was stirring a cup of coffee. "Hi, you are new here right? Smiled Prisana.

"Yes, I am. I arrived last week," Georgio replied.

Prisana extended her hand. "I'm Prisana."

"Georgio. Nice to meet you."

"You are the new Italian teacher the faculty has been looking for. They were starting to get concerned, you know. We are four weeks into the first semester and have a lot of students enrolled to learn Italian. Still it's good

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to see they found someone. Where are you from?"

"I have been working in Spain at a college teaching Italian. Mt family home is in Sicily," said Georgio.

"Oh really, have you met Jose, our Spanish teacher?"

"Yes, Jose and I have been corresponding through e-mail. He has been very helpful in providing information to me about Phuket."

"Yes, Jose is very kind. He is the founder of a non-government organisation here in Phuket. He has rented a building in Phuket town where he provides refuge to needy women."

"What do you teach here?" asked Georgio.

"English for Hospitality and English for Effective Communication. I also do a lot of faculty administration like helping foreign staff settle in." Prisana looked down at her cup and stirred small amount of coffee left, again. If you need any help with your visa and work permit or perhaps just some shopping I would be happy to assist you. I have a car if you need to travel anywhere."

"Thanks, Ok. That's very kind of you." Georgio and Prisana resumed their seats in the faculty meeting. Prisana was always helping new foreign teachers. She gave them assistance in many ways - shopping, campus orientation, visa and work permit applications and leisure activities. And of course the beach. She knew all the best beaches on the island. She had, after all, escaped to the beach every weekend where she sunbaked, read and watched. She studied foreign tourists like an anthropologist carefully observing their speech, gestures and affectations. She saw how they dressed and behaved. She learned how they laughed and how they loved. Prisana recognised how vainglorious and self-obsessed they were. She identified this conceit as a character flaw.

At the end of the meeting Prisana and Georgio left the meeting at about the same time. Walking through the corridor they began to chat again. They descended via the stairs from the fourth level where offices of The Institute of Languages was located.

"You're staying on campus in the staff accommodation complex, aren't you? Asked Prisana.

"Yes. In the middle block of apartments."

"Do you like it?"

"It's a little austere and sterile. However, it is spacious and furnished which makes life easier."

"Do you have everything you need? Would you like to do some shopping?"

"Well, actually that would be great. I would like to buy some groceries and household products. Is there a large supermarket near the university?"

"Sure there is. Its called Big C. Why don't we meet downstairs at your apartment complex in say ten minutes? We can go in my car."

"Ok."

"I'll see you soon then." Prisana turned into the women's restroom where she looked at herself in the mirror. She returned to her office, up the stairs, to the fourth floor.

"Hi Kane, how are you?" Kane Lambin stood a little more erect when Prisana entered the office.

"I just sorting through these resumes for Ajarn Benjawan. She is looking for two more teachers to start before first semester next year."

"English teachers?"

"Yes, English teachers. This time we want to employ candidates of a better calibre than the last lot."

"And please, no more sex tourists hey."

"Yeah, that's right."

Prisana collected her belongings and turned off her computer. She walked quickly out of the office and almost forgot to say goodbye to Kane.

"See you Kane."

"See you Prisana."

Prisana marched past him and out the door. Kane lifted his head from the pile of resumes on his wooden desk and looked at her from behind as she pushed open the outer office door and turned to descend the stairs.

Prisana met Georgio as arranged under his apartment complex. She had changed and wore shorts

that revealed her fine, unblemished alabaster skin. They drove towards the guard box at the gated entry of the university campus. It was dusk and the yellow lights of the rooms in the student dormitories appeared like square lanterns floating on a purple twilight haze. The smell of Frangipanis was heavy in the air and the cicadas and crickets were starting their nightly performances. The boom gate lifted like a raised eyebrow and they coasted through the barrier giving the guard a salutary nod. The private road was framed with large Sino-Portugese styled homes whose sprawling gardens were vibrant with blossoming flowers.

The blue Toyota Corolla rolled forward along the curving road until it reached a T-intersection with the main road. Prisana looked carefully to the left and right and then turned the steering wheel to drive on to the main road. They had reached a traffic light and stopped. Prisana tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and smiled at Georgio. Georgio wiped his brow with his hand. The traffic light signalled green. Georgio ran his fingers through his hair and spoke. "You must let me cook dinner for you tonight. Do you prefer a white or red sauce?

"Well, I don't mind. I don't get to eat Italian food very often so either sauce would be a treat!"

"Perhaps we can also start with a Caprese salad - Tomatoes, Mozzarella cheese, and olive oil. You will like it very much."

"Sounds good. Perhaps we can also enjoy a bottle of wine."

Prisana and Georgio returned to the university after dark. They drove through the main gate and reached Prisana's apartment complex. It was a chest-heaving walk up to the fifth level where Prisana's apartment was located. Prisana pushed the door opened. "Please, sit down and relax Georgio. I will get things started in the kitchen and call in for help soon."

Georgio looked around the room. The apartment was cavernous with two separate bedrooms, a kitchenette, a bathroom and a large rectangular window looking out onto a balcony laden with leafy plants. It was clear Prisana had created a private sanctuary from the world where she could retreat and meditate. The room was festooned with traditional Thai decorative artwork. A rice paper umbrella lay on its side concealing a light globe that would fill the room with a low, diffused light when switched on. Large silk banners dangled on the walls from ornately carved wooden hangers.

On the ground there were thinly cushioned floor mats with prints detailing provincial rural landscapes. A large screen television, a compact disk player and a computer were draped with calico cloths and elaborate tapestries. Paintings of eclectic styles and provenances lined the walls. A large nude portrait of a reclining woman with voluptuous proportions aroused Georgio's interest. Prisana switched on some of the rectangular paperlanterns that were suspended from the low ceiling. She lit some candles and ignited lavender incense sticks.

"What sort of music do you like?" she asked.

"It depends on my mood really," replied Georgio.

"What about some jazz?"

"Sure. Ok."

Georgio eventually joined her in the kitchen and they prepared a sauce and salad while the water boiled. They opened the bottle of wine and snacked on crusty bread seasoning their conversation with platitudes about food, travel and music. After dinner they listened to more music while they cleaned up.

"Do you dance, Prisana?"

"I learned traditional Thai dancing in college and some classical Waltz steps."

Georgio took the tea towel out of Prisana's hand and pressed his palm to hers. He reached down and grasped her other hand and slowly swayed to the sensuous rhythm of the music. She appeared to succumb completely to his ministrations and they were soon kissing passionately. They motioned out of the kitchen rolling and pressing against the wall until they fell onto the bed. Georgio pressed his hips into Prisana who writhed with abandon beneath him. She curled her tongue into his mouth and licked his ears like a serpent. Georgio sighed in ecstasy, his body convulsing and buckling with powerful spasms. Engulfed by passion, their bodies bonded together in a ferocious rhapsody of lust.

They lay together for hours. The candles had burned down to their bases while the incense sticks had turned to dust. The music had stopped and only their stifled breathing resonated through the stagnant air. Outside the moon bathed the leaves of the trees with its ethereal radiance. The dark, velvety water of the lake was littered with glittering stars. Frogs croaked deep in the ground as the earth slowly turned on its axis towards a new day. A few more hours past and Prisana stirred. "Georgio, it's 5am. You'd better go before daylight."

Prisana was first in the office. She switched her computer on and checked her e-mail. She drafted a short e-mail to Georgio. Kane Lambin pushed through the door.

"Good morning Prisana. How are you?"

"Fine thanks Kane. How are you going with those applications?"

"Would you believe that four out of five applicants have phoney degrees!"

"How can you tell a degree certificate is not the real thing?"

"Well most genuine degree certificates have certain consistent distinguishing features."

"Such as?"

"A hallmark, usually relief, representing the seal of the Chancellor's office. This is very hard to reproduce convincingly. And some of these universities simply don't exist or the name that appears as the Chancellor's is fictitious."

"Are there any that are suitable candidates?"

"Just a few. I am still checking them out to make sure their credentials are real. Ajarn Benjawan has also given me one belonging to a guy who is currently working at the Andaman Language School who has been teaching social psychology as a guest lecturer with us."

"Well good luck. Have you met Georgio the new Italian teacher?"

"Yes, I met him a few days ago. We are going out tonight for a few drinks."

"Really. Where are you guys going?"

"Patong probably. Why don't you join us?"

"Sure Ok."

Throughout the day Prisana could not stop thinking about Georgio. When she passed him in the outer office they both held a knowing look that was conspicuous. Kane joined Georgio for lunch as they increasingly spent more time together. Prisana recognised that to get close to Georgio and remain discreet she would have to spend more time with Kane Lambin. This would be easy she thought. She knew for some time that Kane had been in love with her.

In Patong that evening, the three of them ended up at a bar where they sat for a few hours. Kane and Georgio flirted with Prisana who enjoyed the fawning overtures of both men but desired the attention of only one of them. Prisana who was intelligent, articulate and beautiful, charmed both Georgio and Kane. Most foreign tourists and expatriates found Thai women alluring but often lamented that they could not sustain the relationship because of the inability to communicate with the girls in English. Well, Prisana had a Master's degree in applied linguistics taken in English. In her undergraduate degree she majored in English literature. She read widely in English, had an immense circle of foreign, English speaking friends. She had also been involved romantically with an American who was a teacher at the university a few years earlier.

"Are you guys hungry? Do you want to go for a pizza?" asked Kane.

"We've got leftovers at home," Georgio whispered to Prisana.

Kane turned his head to look at Prisana and then turned it back again pretending that he had heard nothing. He felt unsettled by the implications that Georgio and Prisana had dined together in his or her)

apartment. After all, Georgio had a British girlfriend of four years who would be arriving in September, less than a month away, to take up a post as a Spanish teacher. He lifted his glass and poured the beer left in his glass into his mouth unflinchingly. "Well, what about that pizza guys?" Kane repeated.

Georgio and Prisana both indicated they were not hungry and that, as it was getting late, they should probably return back to the university. They saw Kane off on his motorcycle and drove back to Prisana's apartment. Georgio stayed the night again and left before the sun rose the next morning. This routine continued for some weeks with Georgio and Prisana stealing private, furtive moments together at the university and listening to music, cooking, sleeping, and dancing in her apartment like moonlight silhouettes behind the veil of night.

Chapter Seven

Kane Lambin woke earlier than he normally did the next morning. He rode his motorcycle into the university and logged on to the network. He spent three hours trying to access Prisana's e-mail account with the object of confirming his suspicions. He felt betrayed by Prisana. There was a time before Georgio arrived when Prisana seemed to have been flirting with him. They had dinner together often in her apartment, shared many stimulating conversations and he admired her for her personal achievements. He photographed the paintings she had produced over the preceding twelve months and transferred the images onto disk and subsequently onto his laptop computer. When his mother had visited from Arizona, Prisana graciously took them both around to see the sights of the island. He had developed a

profound attraction to her and now she seemed to be avoiding him. He resented this.

"Hi Kane, you're in early." Prisana's voice startled him.

"Hi Prisana. How are you?"

"Fine. Have you managed to find evidence of lies?" asked Prisana. Kane hesitated for a moment. His laptop was positioned so that only he could view the screen. Is it possible she knew? How could she?

"Lies, what about them?'

"You know, false statement about personal achievements in the resumes you are evaluating."

"Oh, yes. I mean no. I mean, I have not detected any new false statements but I did ring one of the universities that were mentioned on a certificate and found that the Chancellor's signature was indeed a forgery as the undersigned dean had retired years earlier."

"Its very disappointing really," Prisana said indignantly. "How far do these guys think they will go. It is only a matter of time before their lies are discovered and

then they face dismissal and disgrace." Prisana settled at her desk and began her own work preparing for her classes after lunch. Kane resumed his efforts to hack into Prisana's internal university e-mail account.

"Have you heard from Georgio, Kane?"

"Ah, no. I haven't seen him today. He may be teaching."

Kane didn't even look up at Prisana. He was too focussed on his objective. He had been using different password combinations to access her account. He must have tried a hundred different combinations. He was fatigued. He decided to try another approach. It worked. He had gained entry to her e-mail account. Kane took a deep breath and started to look at the inbox entries. There were dozens of e-mails from Georgio. He read a few of the e-mails. Many e-mails contained romantic poetry. It was clear to Kane that Prisana and Georgio were secret lovers. He felt gutted. He read and read until he was disgusted with himself for being in love with her. He decided to leave the office early. Prisana continued to work and wondered where Georgio might be. She sent him a text message suggesting that they go away on the weekend to Krabi, a secluded and beautiful beach north-west of Phuket. As it was early September, Prisana knew the

popular beaches of Krabi would be quiet and secluded.

Kane spent the weekend commiserating with a friend he shared his apartment with while Prisana and Georgio went to Krabi. They enjoyed two days together swimming and sunning themselves on the sandy foreshore. They often found refuge from the searing heat under the thatched roof of a small pavilion where Prisana massaged Georgio with coconut oil and watched the waves encroach on the shoreline and destroy a sand castle they had formed in the sand. The tide had swelled and the water was lapping their feet when they decided it was time to return to Phuket. On the way back to the university Prisana and Georgio remained thoughtful and quiet. The sun had fallen to land's end and the shadows were angular and long. The landscape was inhabited with strange shadows of all shapes, grotesque figures marching like the legions of darkness away from the vanishing sun.

"Madeleine arrives tomorrow."

"What time?"

"About noon. Could we pick her up in your car?"

"Sure." Prisana felt the deep stabbing pain of jealousy in her chest. She knew this day would come. She

had to face the fact that his girlfriend would arrive and somehow their destinies would collide until one of them would be left standing with Georgio. She knew little about Madeleine as Georgio did not speak about her much. She knew they had been seeing each other for about four years travelling ad working together over three continents from Spain to England and now Thailand. She wondered whether Madeleine would sense that something was going on between Georgio and her. She believed that they had managed to conduct the illicit affair surreptitiously and had not aroused the suspicion of any of their colleagues, especially as Kane had been with them so often when they went out. However, they both underestimated Kane Lambin. Jealousy makes people do some strange things.

Madeleine's flight from Bangkok arrived as scheduled. She had flown from Madrid where she had to complete her contract teaching English at a local college. She had met Georgio in Italy when she was teaching Spanish and Georgio was working for a travel agency. She encouraged Georgio to enrol in a Spanish language course offered in Spain and then teach at a language school before going on to England and Thailand. Georgio and Prisana waited in the arrivals lounge and colluded to ensure nothing clumsy was said that would give Madeleine reason to be suspicious. "There she is," said Georgio.

Prisana saw Madeleine for the first time and realised that she not only wanted Georgio to be hers but also that Madeleine no longer wanted him. She felt she had control of the present but saw that the past could swell up like a tide and drag off everything she held precious. She looked at Madeleine as she embraced Georgio and disguised her rage behind an affected smile. They hugged each other before Georgio relieved her of her bags and introduced Prisana. In the car on the way back to the university they discussed working conditions and lifestyle on campus in the accommodation block for staff where Georgio and Madeleine would be living together. Madeleine felt curiously uneasy about Prisana but could not quite understand why.

Weeks past and Madeleine learned from Georgio that Prisana had been very helpful to him in establishing himself at the university. However, Madeleine was curious why in his e-mails to her in Spain he mentioned the names of all the expatriate and Thai staff with whom he had become acquainted with and the social circumstances they shared but never once mentioned Prisana. It was when Madeleine learned from Georgio that the two of them went to Krabi that she was convinced something was going on between them. She decided to consult Kane Lambin who shared an office with Prisana.

"Hi Kane, have you got a minute?"

"Sure, come in. Have you settled in Ok?"

"Yes, professionally everything is fine. However I have some personal issues that you may be able to clarify."

"Of course. How can I help?" Kane sensed that this might have something to do with Georgio and Prisana. He immediately empathised with Madeleine who also felt jealous and betrayed.

"Have you noticed anything unusual between Georgio and Prisana?"

Kane stood up and closed the office door. He adjusted his necktie and sat back in his chair. "Well actually I have noticed that they spend a lot of time together. I always see them talking between classes and Prisana always seems to be visiting him in his office. Although, they do talk about sharing and copying music compact disks. Perhaps that is why they are always together."

"Georgio told me that they went to Krabi together for the day and had to stay the night because he became sick. When I asked him about the sleeping arrangements he told me that he slept on the bed and she lay on the floor.

When I asked Prisana about this she said the opposite - that she slept on the bed and he slept on the floor."

"Look Madeleine, while I can't say I have seen anything conclusive I do think that they have been very close and your feelings are probably justified. Why don't you confront them about it?"

"That's sounds like a good idea. After all, why should I be suffering with doubt and suspicion when this can be clarified once and for all."

"You will find them in the Institute library together. I saw them in there about ten minutes ago."

Madeleine walked out of the office and through the outer office. She took the stairs down to the next level and entered the library. Georgio and Prisana were together on a small reading table. They seemed close, too close.

"Hi Madeleine," said Prisana.

"Hi Prisana. Do you mind if I talk to the both of you?"

"Yeah, why not. What's up?" said Georgio

"I want to know what the fuck is going on between you two. I want the fucking truth and I want to know now."

Prisana looked at Georgio searching for an indication of how he may react. She had the presence of mind to disguise the truth but she had to be sure he was going to say the same thing. Instead, Georgio looked sheepishly at Prisana and Prisana realised that the truth was now apparent to her. Prisana's eyes welled up with tears as she looked forlornly back at Georgio. She stood up, turned to look at Madeleine and spoke: "I would do anything for the man I love." She then walked away.

"What the fuck does that mean. You bastard Georgio. Did you sleep with her? How many times did you fuck her Georgio? Why? Why did you do it? Two months away from me and you fool around! Madeleine was in a state of shock. She started to cry and strike Georgio with clenched fists.

"Stop, stop it. Let's talk about it in the apartment." Georgio and Madeleine spent the rest of the afternoon and evening looking numbly at each other. Georgio informed Madeleine that an attraction developed between him and Prisana when he met her in early July. He explained that they briefly indulged their feelings by flirting

with each other but never had sex. Days and nights passed absorbed by burning candles and having painful discussions about the history and future prospects of their relationship. During the day Georgio and Prisana avoided each other.

Prisana decided to relocate to another office to avoid seeing Georgio when he visited Kane. Before she left the office she wrote a new personal e-mail address on a small whiteboard used for messages. She hoped Georgio would see it and communicate with her on that e-mail. A few weeks later when Georgio and Kane were having lunch the subject of office gossip. He learned from Georgio, who came to deeply resent Madeleine and Prisana by now, the intimate, sordid details of their illicit affair.

At the university, over the months of October, November and December Kane had become sympathetic to Prisana for her embarrassing position in the office. She had lost considerable face with her colleagues and friends to all of whom she had been lying. Kane saw this as an opportunity. He befriended Prisana to get closer to her. He consoled her and comforted her. He also noticed the e-mail address that she had left written on the whiteboard in their office. He thought about this for a while and then it occurred to him that her interest in Georgio was so

consuming that the affair would continue. She was likely to use the e-mail to ensure she had a way of letting Georgio reach her if he chose to leave Madeleine. There was one very likely password to her account - Georgio. He tried it. He was right. He knew that Georgio and Prisana continued to correspond, meet secretly and lie to everyone around them. He told nobody.

Not long after the new year, Georgio and Madeleine resigned from Prince of Mahidol University and left Phuket. Georgio returned to Sicily and Madeleine to England. They remained irreconciled. Prisana was emotionally devastated. Her friends consoled her and encouraged her to rebuild her life. Jose suggested she spend a week at his beach house while he travelled to Europe. She spent more time painting and reflecting on the experience with Georgio. She became more absorbed in welfare projects managed by non-government organisations in Phuket. She solicited and undertook translation work for the United Nations and their campaigns to raise awareness over the AIDS epidemic sweeping the Third World. She made plans to resign from the university and return home to Chiang Rai to be with her aged parents.

Chapter Eight

Savvas lay on his back while Jureporn straddled him with her legs. She held her mobile phone in her right hand while she ploughed her left hand through the hair on Savvas' chest. She talked into the phone, occasionally glancing at Savvas to smile. "Have you sent the money? You know, like before. You have my bank number don't you? Uh huh. So do I my love. I do not want to go to Patong. I not like work bar." Jureporn pressed her hips down further on to Savvas' body. She moved her body over his pressed down on him. "I love you and your money. Ok, but send quickly. I need money. I have sold my ring and neck chain. I work KFC now. Not pay much. I do not want to go to Patong again. Yes. I know you send to Udon Thani. My family love you very much. Now

I need more money. Ok. I check tomorrow. I love you." Jureporn threw her mobile onto the bed and bent down to kiss Savvas. Before her lips touched his she said, "Tomorrow, can you show me where Western Union is?"

Jureporn had boyfriends in almost every country represented at a full meeting of the United Nations General Assembly - Italy, Germany, Australia, America, Sweden, Holland, Canada, England and Norway. At her rented house in Patong she kept an album full of photographs of romantic holidays with a gallery of men. Her enthusiasm for international relations afforded her many opportunities to cultivate a moderate proficiency in the languages of her multi-national clientele. She also developed some sophistication with money transfers, bank accounts and the Western Union service.

The next day, Savvas and Jureporn left early for Patong from his bungalow in Kata to locate a branch or agent for Western Union. The national Thai Farmer's bank promoted Western Union services. They entered and looked for a teller. Jureporn sat down with a bank employee who presented her with a form to complete. The form had provision for Jureporn's name and address as receiver of funds and a requirement for the sender's address. These details together with a ten-digit number,

provided to Jureporn by her admirer in Holland, were enough to complete the transfer of four thousand Baht on the spot. Jureporn was visibly relieved and kissed Savvas in exuberance.

They returned to Jureporn's house in Patong. Jureporn lived with six other bargirls from the same bar. The area was the most impoverished in Patong. Open sewers spilling effluent, naked children playing on pot-marked, decaying roads and rabid dogs meandering in lackadaisical sun-struck stupor. Motorbike exhausts peppered the air with puffs of black smoke. They walked across a small courtyard and under some washing hung out on a makeshift clothesline to the door. Outside there were dozens of pairs of shoes, sandals and stilettos. The single bedroom white- washed house had a kitchen - a sink and a tap - and an open shower and toilet area. Mattresses littered the floor where the girls made their beds and stuffed toys crowded for attention on a solitary vinyl couch. Photos of bar girls with falangs featured on a small table. From inside the house Savvas heard desultory voices. A girl was cooking fish in a wok on a small portable gas stove. Another girl hung out some washing. Together these girls were here for a single purpose: Extort as much money from male Caucasian tourists with a penchant for silken Thai skin. They left after half an hour and went to an internet cafe.

Jureporn sat at a terminal with a camera facility where she could communicate in real time with men from around the world. These men would be logged on and registered in a chat room. As soon as Jureporn entered the chat room several men invited her to open her camera – and they would open theirs - allowing for face to face conversations. Jureporn delighted in preening herself for the camera, smiling mischievously. As her image beamed out into the nebulous ethernet of the world wide web, Savvas gasped at the live images beamed back to her through video portals on her computer screen. These men - some appeared to be in office cubicles at work and o thers at home – aroused themselves while typing questions and answers to Jureporn! It was easy to be absorbed by the anonymous relationships formed in these chat rooms. As the time passed, Savvas became restless and asked Jureporn to sign out. they returned to Savvas' bangalow.

Jureporn could have walked out of the pages of an erotic novel. She was young, playful and sexually alluring. She aroused prurient thoughts of the illicit defilement of a minor. She would bite her bottom lip and half-smile igniting a wanton lust to ravish her. Her eyes twinkled with wicked complicity. The promise of carnal voluptuousness was palpable. She could become the source of an all consuming obsession. As an object of

lust she was treacherously seductive and sultry. She was petite and graceful in proportions, fleet of movement and radiated the innocent charms of a twelve year-old girl.

Jureporn was not acquainted with Freud's work on sexual psychoanalysis involving the subconscious and a father's incestual lust for his daughter. Yet, Jureporn played her part as innocent nymphet undermining the family unit and patriarchal structures of authority and power like a consummate professional. Was Jureporn familiar with the subconscious dream landscape of male sexuality? Unlikely, but she had become the ultimate three-dimensional animated schoolgirl fetish - without the dress but heavy on the eye shadow, mascara and lipstick. Was she really like this or was Savvas projecting his lecherous fantasies onto a blank canvas? Like an elaborate pantomime was she performing a role that he had written in his head and she had divined intuitively?

The night of unbridled sexual passion between Jureporn and Savvas was as cataclysmic as a tropical storm. Torrid thrusts and tussles of sweaty lovemaking ended in almost complete physical exhaustion. Breathless and sated, they embraced. Savvas wiped Jureporn's forehead of perspiration while the small beads of sweat that formed on her upper lip belied a salty hunger for more. Her appetite for sexual fulfilment was insatiable. She got

out of bed and stepped into the kitchen. Savvas heard the clinking of cutlery. When she returned she got under the sheets and emerged playfully holding a razor-sharp fruit knife. Savvas gasped and she said she would 'cut' him if he ever betrayed her. He insisted she put the knife down. Somehow, she concealed it and we fell asleep in exhaustion. Later that night Savvas awoke and found himself out of the bed clutching her by the arms. Evidently, he was dreaming of severed appendages and woke in fright!

Jureporn also liked to go dancing at Taipan, the nightclub where bar girls migrated to at about midnight when the prospect of been picked up at their bar had diminished. At Taipan girls gyrated and grooved to the latest dance numbers in an orgy of flagrant, self-absorbed sexuality. Towards two thirty in the morning - nightclub closing time enacted by local government ordinance and enforced rigidly by the local brown-shirted constabulary - the girls look furtively around for a farang to go home with and provide sexual services for short or long time. The few minutes leading up to the 'witching hour' were frenetic and frenzied. Bar girls clamoured for podium space to maximise their exposure to the purveyors of flesh cooling their testosterone-fuelled voyeurism with Carlsberg beer. The music throbbed as girls postured and preened. A glance

at a girl for more than a few salutary seconds was interpreted as an invitation for a booking.

Savvas was tired and resisted Jureporn's overtures to go to Taipan. His overplayed contrition was not enough to placate her adolescent angst and he sensed she started to brood. She lunged out of bed and put her clothes on. The intermittent buzz of her mobile phone being switched on hit a raw nerve of jealousy with him. Jureporn took a small piece of paper out of her bag and keyed a phone number in her phone. "Do you remember me. I saw you in Taipan." Savvas heard a muffled voice emanating from the phone, decidedly male. "You gave me your number," Jureporn continued."Your hotel in Patong? Which room number?" The voice was conversational and upbeat. "Ok, I'll see you soon." Savvas felt crushed.

Jureporn stepped out of his bungalow and onto the balcony. She seemed to be phoning for a tuk-tuk. It was unclear whether she had difficulty getting through or was prevaricating. Prevaricating, posturing, and preening – these techniques were the standard operating stratagems the bar girls used with their clientele. Eventually Savvas went outside on the balcony and tried to persuade her to return inside to bed. Jureporn remained obstinately opposed. Eventually he lost his patience and provoked by the injury to his sense of

masculine pride, he dragged her by the hand back into the bungalow. Jureporn moped around for a while and then fell in a heap on the bed, fully clothed. Savvas could hear a stifled sobbing but couldn't be sure.

Then it was Savvas' turn to be petulant. The ever-growing late hour and deprivation of sleep enraged him. He presented Jureporn with an ultimatum: Explain her behaviour or leave. Jureporn collected her things and went outside. He could see she was frustrated by not getting a tuk-tuk. He went outside, overwhelmed by compassion and confronted her. Jureporn tossed her mobile phone onto the grass in anger. Eventually they returned into the bungalow. They lay on the bed and she turned to initiate the lovemaking they left unfinished earlier. Savvas felt he was in bed with the devil incarnate. He became aroused and his studied indignation was smothered by naked lust. Pride, anger and betrayal were eclipsed by a primeval imperative to copulate. In that moment nothing else mattered except arousal, erection, ejaculation.

The next day the incident was not discussed except for some sweet nothings muttered in a delirious state of abandonment as they embraced in the morning. However, the undercurrents of jealousy, suspicion and mistrust were swirling. The next four days they hardly emerged from the bedroom devouring each other in pools

of sweat. Her natural fragrance filled his nostrils and set off a chemical reaction that produced a long and sustained pseudo-hallucinogenic state. His heart thundered with passion. The whooshing ceiling fan crystallised tremulous beads of sweat on their bodies into icy bullets. The white bed sheets became Savvas' body bag. He was enveloped in an ethereal shroud of seduction he could not punch, kick or grab. He was suffocating. He decided to end the affair the next morning.

When he tried to end the relationship Jureporn refused to accept it. She manoeuvred and manipulated to postpone the inevitable. She reminded him that she would cut his penis off while he slept if he went with other girls or crossed her. However, strenuous argument seemed to weaken her resolve and he finally managed to coax her into the jeep and drive her back to Patong. He was relieved that Jureporn was out of his bungalow and his life! Savvas' friends warned him about Patong bar girls and their self-serving agendas. However, his contentment was to be short lived.

At three in the morning Jureporn was at his door drunk and delirious from hours of dancing and drinking at Taipan nightclub. With a fistful of Baht and a giveaway Kristov Vodka T-shirt, she knocked at his bungalow door. "Because I love you," she muttered and collapsed into his

arms. Savvas took her into the bathroom where she vomited violently into the toilet. At that moment he looked at her and felt a pang of conscience for an eighteen-year old girl who was quite obviously not in control of herself. He realised that his assessment of her as an experienced and manipulative temptress may have been exaggerated. He cleaned her up and carried her to his bed. Her feet were blackened by dancing without shoes and he sponged them clean. She slept for fourteen hours.

It wasn't long before Jureporn seduced Savvas into their old routine of sex and sleep, hypnotised by the corkscrew effect of the spiralling ceiling fan above the bed that he stared at lying on his back. After some hours of sustained thought while lying in bed, Savvas managed to summon the presence of mind to make a decision to take her home again. In the afternoon he drove her back to her room in Patong. Like a hungry kitten she turned up on his doorstep at four in the morning! In fact, for five nights in a row she did the same despite his clear instructions to the contrary. She threatened to leap off his high balcony if he did not open his door. On the 5th night she turned up at six in the morning. She took of all of her clothes and demanded to be let in. Savvas relented and they talked and fell asleep.

In the morning Savvas called old friend who was a seasoned expatriate. Known as the Iceman, he was a resident of Phuket and an incorrigible denizen of the Bangla Road dens of iniquity. When he used the services of bar girls, he had a seventy-two hour rule: He did not allow bar girls to stay in his apartment any longer than three days.By contacting the Iceman, Savvas hoped to get more insight into what motivated Jureporn. He wondered why Jureporn was so emotional and began questioning his hardened prejudices and assumptions about bar girls. The conversation reassured Savvas that the working girls were experienced professionals.

On the way to lunch Savvas and Jureporn stopped at an internet cafe. They each had their own terminal. Absorbed in their work, an hour passed before Savvas quietly got up and went over to Jureporn. Unbeknown to her he saw her chatting, camera to camera with a Caucasian man. Savvas looked at the thread of conversation as Jureporn waited for his typewritten words and then typed her replies. After the exchange of pleasantries and compliments, the young man informed Jureporn that he would be in Bangkok over the next few days. Jureporn provided her mobile number and requested his, arranging to call him to meet in Bangkok. Savvas said nothing and walked towards the cashier, enlightened and relieved.

Savvas decided to get the help of a Canadian friend's Thai wife. He drove to Andrew's massage business where he had arranged to have Andrew's Thai wife, Noi, speak to Jureporn and inform her that he thought it would be best for both of them to resume their lives and daily routines and responsibilities. Jureporn reacted with anger and resentment to the overtures, refusing to get out of his jeep. Eventually Noi and another woman from the massage business spoke to her and recommended that they all return to Savvas' bungalow with Jureporn and collect her things and see her off. Savvas agreed.

The drive was short and dramatic. Going around a corner Jureporn opened her passenger door and tried leap out of the jeep! Savvas scrambled to reach over and clutch Jureporn by the arm dragging her back into the cabin. Eventually they reached Savvas' bungalow where Jureporn gathered her belongings and went out into the rain refusing a ride back into town. Savvas received a text message from Jureporn: "Fuck you and fuck off!" A subsequent phone call involved a threat that her silent and shadow lurking Thai bodyguard would execute him. There was a further hint that she was on the payroll of the Thai Mafia who had been enjoying a percentage of her earnings. These men would be motivated by her malicious lies to give Savvas a problem, she claimed.

Andrew's wife, Noi, suggested that Jureporn was a seasoned prostitute and had probably been working in her own province and Bangkok since the age of fourteen. Savvas reflected how back at her house she clung to him with tender affection professing her heartfelt love and devotion to him and then a short time later was arranging to meet a stranger via the internet. In the West this would be treacherous. However, here in Thailand, the notion of a lie was anathema. Thai people conveniently rearranged the facts to keep their falang friends happy and their interests - business and relationship - served. They did not see this as deceptive or false. Saving face and preserving an outward appearance or semblance of social equilibrium was paramount.

Jureporn, like most Patong bargirls was from the remote, impoverished provinces that people in the West would regard as the Third World. Muddy rice fields and rickety shacks on stilts surrounded by grazing buffalo set the scene for a rural landscape that never saw the Industrial Revolution. Many worked to support family in these regions. Few bargirls drove BMW's or wore designer labels. In this regard they were selfless and charitable citadels on whom many in large extended families relied on for survival. Perhaps this was a lie Western men told each other to assuage their injured masculine pride when their Thai girlfriend openly

flirted and betrayed them with other clients when they should have been enthralled their own presence. The notion of betrayal presupposed a sense of conjugal loyalty and monogamy usually found in relationships in the West. Did this apply in Thailand where the imperative of survival glistened on a reptile's tongue and in the twinkle of a bargirl's eye?

Bargirls were not cognisant of the romantic tradition that became the foundation of contemporary relationships, as people in the West knew them. Romance was born in the songs of wandering minstrels and troubadours during the Middle ages. The notion was further embroidered by medieval sonnets and plays. Finally, 'love' was bestowed the gift of immortality by the movie stars who were famous during Hollywood's Golden Year's film legacy.

In the past people learned to kiss, swoon, dance and flirt from celluloid. Thai girls learned to imitate these nuances and copy them like the ubiquitous elephant figurine in the bazaar. In fact, in Phuket there was a proliferation of stores selling flawless imitations of famous, iconic artworks - Rembrandt, Picasso, El Greco, Renoir etc - copied from art books. Love and romance were also commodities in this bazaar and were just as expertly reproduced, word for word, sigh for sigh, for a

consumer who clamoured for it in the West but found the price extortive. In Thailand, love was sold on a stick, seasoned with sugar and spice and lightly roasted by flames leaping about like the forked tail of the devil. Caveat Emptor, Savvas thought.

Chapter Nine

Savvas' appointment at Prince of Mahidol University was largely the result of the endorsement given to his application by department head, Ajarn Benjawan. While first semester would begin in June, Savvas was pleased to be appointed as early as March. Kane Lambin knew that Savvas was introduced by Ajarn Benjawan and so he afforded Savvas considerable latitude in conducting his own affairs. As the most senior member of staff in the English department, Kane enjoyed certain privileges. Ajarn Benjawan delegated to him the responsibility of soliciting and screening applicants for new appointments. He also set the tone for office working hours, office protocol and student examinations. Through March and over the

subsequent months of April and May, Savvas came to learn a great deal about the two other teachers with whom he shared the same office in the Institute of Languages.

Kane, a former Arizona patrolman and prison guard, stood at six feet and two inches tall. While he no longer wore a uniform, he still carried himself as if he did. He had a wooden, erect posture, a legacy of his years spent in the American armed services. His immaculately pressed, long sleeved shirts were neatly tucked into his pleated trousers. His leather belt was coiled around his waist without pressure, suspended there like an accessory on a display mannequin. His classic-cut shirt collars framed a perfectly tied Windsor knot on his necktie that stretched from his neck to his waist like a piece of cardboard. Every inch of tailoring that covered his body disguised every inch of his raw humanity.

When Savvas was introduced to Norman Black he was pleased to have met someone who seemed to have an eclectic erudition usually found in creative individuals. His bookshelf was heavy with tomes on reading poetry, writing a novel, psychology and metaphysics. He also had many books on Jungian psychoanalysis, pagan symbolism and Greek and Roman mythology. Dante, Neitzsche and Plato shared a shelf with The Wizard of Oz. Cervantes,

Whitman and Blake leaned against King Arthur and the Legends of the Round Table. The book on Mephistopheles stood alone at a corner of the shelf. There were photographs of what appeared to be neolithic cave drawings depicting animals and human figures. There was also a photo of Norman with much longer hair looking bohemian. He was standing facing the camera with his arms stretched out by his side with his palms opened and some of his fingers curled up like a figure in a religious portraiture of the Christian Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Norman had been teaching in Uttradit a town that was located north-east of Bangkok. He was one of four foreigners who lived there in a population of two hundred and fifty thousand Thais. Norman spoke fondly of his students whom he said tested and challenged him in ways he never expected. He talked about the amazing progress the students had achieved through being exposed to a learner-centred model of teaching, where students were given the autonomy to have more control of the learning experience.

Norman believed that Thailand was leading the world in learner-centred education and had written an academic paper on the subject. He criticised the educational system in America saying that it was used to

reinforce existing power structures, creating a social system that disenfranchised the poor and equipped the wealthy with a cultural and historical mandate to continue to exploit the disadvantaged with impunity.

Savvas sat at his desk looking pensively into the air. It was June, and the first semester had started. He had been busy preparing a lesson to deliver after lunch. However, he was not able to think of an interesting way to stimulate the interest of students in the new material that was to be covered. Reading and comprehension as a subject matter could be so tedious and trying to get non-native English speakers to improve their understanding of these skills was always challenging. He needed some attention grabber or stunt to arouse the interest of students in a way that would be sustainable. He sat at his desk absorbed with his work when Norman noticed his impish manner.

"Are you preparing a lesson for this afternoon, Savvas?"

"Yes, but I haven't quite thought of the way I will introduce the next topic."

"Do you mind if I follow you into your next class – one o'clock, isn't it – and observe?"

"Sure, if you like. I can't guarantee it will be interesting though."

"That's ok. I'll just sit and watch."

Savvas collected his folders and books and stood up. Norman got up and followed Savvas out of the office. They walked down the stairs to the next level. They walked briefly along the corridor before entering the open door to the classroom. Approximately twenty-five students were already in the room and seated. Norman sat on a chair near the door while Savvas took a chair a sat closer to the half-circle formation his students had assumed. Norman sat quietly while Savvas placed his books and papers on a table. Savvas waited for a few minutes while the students settled and stopped talking. He looked carefully around the room at the students. The students looked openly and expectantly at Savvas. Savvas stood up and walked over to student. He cupped his hand over his mouth and began whispering into the ear of the student. He did that for several minutes while the rest of the class looked in curiosity. Their interest in what was going on increased while Norman looked on unmoved.

"Ajarn Norman," said the student, "Can I please ask you to open your book to page one hundred and

thirty six and read the second paragraph from the top?"

Norman looked perplexed. He quickly surveyed the students before focussing his eyes on Savvas. He abruptly turned his head back towards the class looking at the students momentarily and then riveted his head back towards Savvas.

"Ajarn Norman," repeated the student, "Please open your book and turn to page one hundred and thirty six and read the second paragraph from the top."

Norman opened his book and turned to page one hundred and thirty six. He read the second paragraph and looked up at student. "Thank you Ajarn Norman. Now please close you book." Norman closed his book and looked back over at Savvas. Savvas avoided his eye contact and motioned to the student to proceed with the activity.

"Ajarn Norman, can you tell the class what is the main idea of the paragraph?"

Norman looked unsettled and unnerved. He thought about the student's question and then answered. "The paragraph is comparing Indian food with Chinese food." All the other students referred to the selected

paragraph. They reviewed the paragraph and nodded approvingly. The student asking the questions continued.

"What are the three main similarities between Indian food and Chinese food listed in the paragraph?" the student asked. Norman looked puzzled. He stared indifferently into the space before him. A few minutes passed and Norman seemed increasingly anxious. His eyes rose into his eyelids until they were dark crescents of hate. The whites of his eyes glowed with an unearthly white terror that he unleashed on everyone in the room. Savvas noticed Norman's transforming mood and quickly interjected.

"I think the student is asking you to recollect the three main points the writer of the paragraph lists explaining why Indian and Chinese foods are similar."

Norman reflected briefly on Savvas' statement and then spoke. "How they are similar"

"Pardon?" queried Savvas.

"How they are similar, not why they are similar," Norman said.

"I'm not sure I follow you Norman."

"How' is a question of empirical truth fact but 'why' is a matter of anthropological interpretation." Norman looked smug and self-satisfied.

Savvas reflected on Norman's statement. He muttered the words to himself repeating the question to himself. "I think there is an overlap of meaning between these two words and at that point they are interchangeable. Certainly the Thai students would not appreciate the difference."

"No. You are wrong. The words are entirely different." Norman's challenge was direct and uncompromising. Savvas felt uncomfortable and wondered why Norman was behaving in this way. They were colleagues and friends after all. It was not uncommon for teachers to present lessons together. Norman seemed to disregard how this confrontation would present them to the students. "There is no overlap in meaning."

Savvas looked thoughtful. "In providing a reason why the foods are similar do we not also present a reason that shows us how the foods are similar? In other words, in answering 'why' we also address how?"

Norman was quick to respond. "'How' is asking us to list the ways in which Indian food and Chinese food or their constituent parts are similar. However, 'why' is asking us to examine the historical antecedents to contemporary Indian and Chinese food and reflect on the way the unique provenance of each has contributed to their similarity."

Savvas raised his eyebrows in acquiescence. He realised that the students had no ability to understand such high-falutin language and that a continuation of the discussion would only alienate them and reflect adversely on the reputation of foreign teachers at the university. He looked around the room and could see that the students were distracted by the incident. Disguising his injured pride, Savvas looked over at Norman and invited Norman to continue the discussion.

The student repeated the question. "How are Indian and Chinese foods similar?"

"Well," Norman said triumphantly, "we know that Indian food and Chinese food are similar because, according to the author of the paragraph, they both use rice as an ingredient, both involve spices and both rely very little on the inclusion of white or red meat."

When Savvas returned to the office after dismissing the class he did not find Norman seated at his desk. He sat down and reflected on the incident in the classroom. He felt that Norman's petulant outburst was very strange but could not quite understand what motivated him to raise such a pedantic issue before a class full of students. Surely, Norman could have simply taken the student's question on face value and answered accordingly, he thought. Instead he seemed to take advantage of a contentious academic point to play a game of one-upmanship. Or was there another reason, Savvas thought? They had only recently met so there was no reason to believe that he offended Norman in some way in the recent past. He could not think of a conflict of interest that may motivate Norman towards petty recriminations. Professionally, they were colleagues – both were English instructors in the Institute of languages. There were no senior positions in the department to covet that may have caused tension nor were invidious comparisons of foreign teachers being made by the faculty. Norman's behaviour was unprovoked and unusual, Savvas felt and for this reason Norman Black was a dangerous man.

Chapter Ten

By July, the second month of the first semester, most teachers were settled in their routines of delivering classes and preparing tests and assignments. Savvas had just returned from Kuala Lumpur where he visited the Thai Embassy to extend his visa. Prisana had also just returned from Bangkok where she visited the Australian embassy to apply for a visa to travel to Australia. Prisana walked into the English department offices and saw Savvas at his desk. "Hi Savvas, I heard you went to Malaysia for your visa. Did everything work out as you planned?"

"Yes, it took two days for them to process the application but finally I was able to collect the visa yesterday afternoon and fly back to Phuket. I spent a

couple of days looking around Kuala Lumpur. And you?"

"I'm planning a holiday to Australia so I have just returned from visiting the Australian Embassy. You're Australian, aren't you?"

"Yes. If you like I can make some suggestions about interesting places to visit."

"Actually, it's something of a study trip as well as a holiday before I return to my hometown in Northern Thailand."

"So you're leaving the university?"

"My contract with them ends in September this year. I won't be renewing it."

"Have you been here very long?"

"Ten years this September."

"Well, that's a long time. You must be leaving with a great sense of achievement. The university is about twelve years old which means you were here during some formative years."

"In fact, when I was appointed Ajarn Benjawan and I developed the Institute of Languages as a new faculty. We designed the courses for a very small population of students. The university grew over the years to have more courses and subjects and teachers of course."

"And now you want to leave?"

"I reached the point where I lost my passion for my work. I realised I needed to change the direction of my life."

"Travel or study abroad perhaps?"

"I have been painting over the last few years and I thought of taking a new course in Sydney while visiting a few galleries as well."

"I will write to two old friends – Robin and Lorrie - who I know will be happy to help. Both women are elderly residents of Sydney and have owned and managed an antique restoration business for years. In fact both of them do a great deal of ceramic, porcelain, gold, silver and fine bone china restoration. They could make enquires about short art courses in the metropolitan area."

"Really? That would be great."

"I wonder if you could write down some personal details about your interests and achievements to give the old girls something to work with. I can incorporate the information into my letter to them."

"Ok. I will leave it on your desk."

"Great."

Prisana left the room but her pleasant fragrance lingered. Savvas continued to work at his desk when Kane Lambin entered the office and sat at his desk. Kane looked at the open door that Prisana had just left through and glanced at Savvas. His eyes surveyed the room while he seemed to reflect on a transient thought. He switched on his laptop computer and became absorbed by what appeared to be a letter. He had informed Savvas and Norman several weeks earlier that it was his intention to eventually leave the university in Phuket and relocate to Turkey as an English instructor at a university there.

Kane was posted to Turkey when he was in the armed services and had become conversant with the language and fond of the lifestyle and landscape. He also developed enduring friendships. Kane often regaled

Savvas and Norman with his stories of experiences in the services and his employment as a policeman and prison guard. His favourite story, which he told several times, involved prison offices conspiring to cover-up an incident where a guard seriously assaulted an inmate. According to Kane, he alone refused to collude with the other guards and as a result was despised by his work colleagues.

"I have finished working on the first part of the forthcoming mid-term examination. Norman has also finished his part. When you finish your part Savvas we can all meet and see if we agree on the entire paper."

"I'm done too."

"What if we meet after lunch then?"

"Sounds good."

Norman walked into the office and greeted Kane. He moved around the office avoiding eye contact with Savvas. Savvas did not know how to react. He recognised that Norman was obviously perturbed by what had happened in the classroom and harboured a grudge. Savvas thought it was best to probably not raise the issue as he sensed that there was more to the incident – and

Norman – that appeared on the surface. "You guys want to get some lunch?" asked Kane. The three of them were lunching together on most days. At around midday they would walk across the sports oval to a small cluster of restaurants and fruit stalls located outside the back gate of the university campus.

Norman would walk beside Kane very closely. Whenever they were together it was apparent that there was a strange likeness between them. They were both tall and both wore the apparel of Wall street executives – crisply pressed long-sleeved shirts, heavily starched collars and cuffs, faux-silk neckties and pleated trousers falling onto black, patent leather shoes. It was so hot most days, with an ambient temperature of thirty-five degrees Celsius and a humidity level of ninety-eight percent, that their selection of clothes was highly impractical. Loose, linen or fine cotton shirts opened at the neck with lightweight cotton trousers would have been more suitable for a tropical climate. As most surfaces on the island and many parts of the campus were unmade, lightweight suede shoes or sandals were appropriate footwear. Kane and Norman looked like two Mormon missionaries whose sartorial style was unchanged in an environment where other expatriates adapted and acclimatised to be in harmony with the climate and lifestyle.

There was something else about the relationship between Norman and Kane that was ineffable. They were together a great deal. They were seen walking, talking and working together all over campus. On the many occasions Savvas happened to be present in the office he observed that Kane did most of the talking while Norman seemed to agree and echo Kane 's sentiments. Savvas also detected some very subtle manipulation from Norman towards Kane. Norman appeared to be building a psychological profile on Kane and using the insights into his heart and mind to befriend him. Norman's motive was unclear to Savvas but he knew Norman was up to something.

Kane and Norman returned to the office after lunch while Savvas stayed a little while longer at the restaurant. When Kane entered the room he noticed a white flower on Savvas' desk on top of a folded note. He suspected that Prisana had left it there when they were out at lunch. Savvas returned soon afterwards and went to his desk. He saw the note and flower and knew it was from Prisana. The note contained the personal information that he requested and thought would be helpful to his friends in Sydney in preparing for her visit to Australia.

The note indicated that Prisana had a Bachelor's degree in liberal arts with a major in English literature.

She had also undertaken a Master's program in Bangkok producing a thesis in the field of applied linguistics. Her ongoing research that would become the subject of a doctoral dissertation was in the field of self-access facilities and materials. She had been published in academic journals and presented many seminars on the subject of autonomous learning. Her avocations included oil and watercolour painting, writing and reading. She was also involved in the work of a locally based non-government organisation helping destitute and abused women. Savvas read the information and was impressed with Prisana's achievements. He planned to copy the document and include it in his correspondence to his friends in Sydney.

"Are you ready Savvas?" interrupted Kane.

"Yes, ready." Savvas folded Prisana's note and took out the section of the mid-term examination that he drafted. Norman and Kane exchanged their work and started reading. Savvas revised his own section. Norman and Kane seemed to be satisfied with each other's contribution. Savvas got up out of his chair and placed a copy of his section on Kane 's desk and a separate copy on Norman's desk. They reviewed it for a few minutes and seemed to have no objections to the content. This was a little curious to Savvas as he expected Norman to

have seen profound pedagogical flaws in the questions he drafted.

In the past, Norman had absorbed hours in the office debating Kane and Savvas about obscure, unimportant academic points as they formulated composition questions and tests. He made speeches in the office about wanting to produce the best work he could to serve personal integrity and professional accountability. He demanded exactitude and consistency in the preparation of assignments and evaluation of tests for students. He also insisted that an answer key be produced with every exam so that teachers marking the papers could do so with consistency. He insisted that the reason he consumed endless hours in refining and revising work was because he wanted to be fair to students.

When Savvas suggested that an exam paper did not have to be perfect because adjustments on grading performance could be made when evaluating the answers and results of students, Norman did a complete turnaround and accepted the proposition. This left Savvas wondering about his motives. For a time Savvas speculated that Norman may have been a perfectionist but he also entertained other possibilities. He wondered why Norman wanted to create the impression of being

a perfectionist. Was he evaluating the other teachers in the office? There was something definitely funny about Norman's unqualified approval of Savvas' contribution.

"We can trust you with the exam paper, Can't we Savvas?" Norman's question was provocative.

"Of course, why not?" answered Savvas indignantly.

"Well, we feel you have no credibility."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, you have broken agreements made in this office in the past." Norman tilted his reading glasses down his nose so he could look at Kane in the eyes. "We just want to be sure you won't give it to the students and say that your action was somehow in line with a learner centred approach of teaching."

"That's ridiculous. I know what is appropriate behaviour when it comes to examinations. And what agreements have I broken in this office in the past?"

"You involved me in a bizarre classroom exercise

after I specifically requested to be an observer."

"Pardon? I thought you would appreciate the spontaneity of the activity. The students are often bored with an interface with the same teacher all the time. I thought they would be interested in a new face in the classroom interacting with them."

"You ambushed me!" Norman turned and faced Savvas with his imposing stature. He removed his reading glasses and pinned Savvas back with eyes intense as iron nails. "You deliberately set out to humiliate and embarrass me in front of the students."

"You invited yourself into my classroom Norman. How can I have had any intention to embarrass you?"

"You have an agenda Savvas. I know you are a master manipulator. You may be clever but I can see how you influence those around you." Norman was pointing at Savvas while he made his accusations.

"Are you serious Norman?" Savvas looked at Norman's hand. He noticed that Norman's right hand was missing a considerable part of his smallest finger. Perhaps a childhood injury? Savvas thought. He had never noticed this before for some reason.

"I am fucking serious Savvas. Don't fuck with these students Savvas. The classroom is sacrosanct!"

Savvas looked over at Kane who remained uninvolved. Under normal circumstances Kane would have been quick to condemn such an unprofessional outburst. After all, he was a former policeman and prison guard. Why he remained silent while Norman bullied Savvas was puzzling to Savvas.

Chapter Eleven

It had been raining dogs again. At least that is how it seemed after the last heavy monsoon downpour. Phuket Island had a large population of stray dogs. Every torrential thunderstorm washed away anything that wasn't fixed into the ground. Dogs were the first to emerge from the tumult, tails wagging triumphantly. They leapt and bobbed and weaved about with unbridled exuberance and energy. July was always one of the wettest months of the year on the island. The tops of the low green mountains surrounding the university were enveloped with nebulous clouds which, when they collided with the treetops, created precipitation and rain. The storms were often accompanied by lightning and thunder that violently ruptured the heavy humidified air with with cataclysmic force.

Savvas looked outside his office window and saw the monsoon downpour fall down heavily on the entire campus. His jeep was parked on the side of the main internal service road, almost a kilometre from the building where the Institute of Languages was located. He would have to run without cover for most of this distance to reach his jeep. He accepted that at this time of the year it is difficult to avoid getting wet. Before he left the building Savvas noticed Prisana preparing to leave for the day

"Would you like a ride to the staff accommodation buildings?"

"Sure, that would be great."

"How was your day?"

"Very productive in fact. I was able to complete the editing of an English Instructional film that the Institute is doing for the Thai Tourism Authority."

"Yes, I've seen you carrying around film equipment and reviewing sound and video footage on the office computers. Looks like interesting work."

"It is and I get paid extra for it. I am also developing a publication reproducing the content in English. Small businesses will be able to use the booklet as a conversation guide when interacting with English-speaking tourists to the island."

"Your responsibilities sound varied and interesting."

"After ten years of service I have managed to develop some connections with industry and government which often present paid project work. For example, I am also translating documents that are part of an initiative coordinated by the United Nations in Thailand."

As they talked Prasina and Savvas made their way down to the ground level of the Institute of Languages building. They saw that it was still raining heavily and decide to run quickly to Savvas' jeep.

"I really appreciate the drive home Savvas. Would you like to come up to my apartment to dry off?

"Ok. That would be good in fact. I feel completely waterlogged."

Savvas followed Prasina up the narrow stairwell that led to the fifth level of the academic staff accommodation complex. There were three buildings in total situated near a picturesque man-made lake. Prisana's apartment was located in the third building near the mountain. They settled in her apartment brewing some tea and getting dry. Prisana went in to take a shower while Savvas relaxed in her living room. Savvas sat on a bed that Prisana had pushed against the wall and draped with a large piece of calico overlayed with a patchwork of richly woven raw silk fabrics from the North to create a large sofa. Large sumptuous cushions upholstered with thickly ribbed, cotton fabrics with oriental motifs provided a comfortable insulation from the apartment wall. The bookshelf was beside the makeshift sofa with wooden lanterns suspended above glowing with a soft yellow light.

Savvas leafed through some of the books on a nearby table including academic dictionaries, books of western idioms, a few tomes on social etiquette and a large textbook on psychological profiling. The magazine stack on the ground consisted of thick, sumptuous publications on interior designing, house furnishings and lifestyle. Savvas wondered whether Prisana had deliberately set out to seduce him – and other foreigners – by familiarising herself with their culture. Alternatively, he reflected she was also a student and teacher of

English literature and the titles on her bookshelf were not inconsistent with this fact.

Savvas identified two stamp albums and picked them up. He opened the first one and saw dozens of meticulously arranged Thai postage stamps. The stamps featured royal personages, picturesque rural scenes and modern industrial infrastructure and industry. These were the cultural myths and images that the government perpetuated to a largely indolent and apathetic population he thought. The second album featured dozens of international stamps from the United States, Australia, Denmark, Japan, England, Hong Kong, Laos, France, Cambodia, Italy, Mynmar amongst others.

Savvas looked at the commemorative images of the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower and Sydney Harbour Bridge and wondered how these cultural icons appeared to her. He wanted to step into the stamps and look for Prisana to discover who she had been in the past? Had she really associated with foreigners like the bar girls of Patong? The post marks on the stamps were relatively contemporary. Savvas speculated that these stamps could have been removed from dozens of letters that may have been exchanged between her and foreign men abroad.

Prisana put on some music and they both reclined on the silk floor cushions talking about art, literature and culture. This was the first of many nights that Prisana and Savvas would share together in her apartment sometimes returning there after having dinner or seeing a movie. They discovered they both felt like outsiders in their own cultures caught between the heritage of their parents and the new world they encountered in education and employment. Prisana became so proficient in English that she had marginalised herself from her contemporaries. Her peers were obsessed with shopping, fashion and pop culture while Prisana was enamoured with the aristocratic elegance and refined gentility of the reign of King Rama the fifth. She read widely and had a sophisticated appreciation of music and art. She also had many foreign friends, mostly educators whom she met at the university.

Savvas noticed a large black and white photograph of a small girl on Prisana's bedroom wall. It was affixed to the wall above her bed. The girl was smiling exuberantly. Her dark brown hair was cut short, raised high around the neck but was left long enough on thesides to cover her ears. Her fringe was cut perfectly straight and fell down on her forehead like a curtain of silk tassels. This style was consistent with the way all young girls in Thailand were expected to wear their hair.

The look that this style created was decidedly androgynous. It seemed to disguise the gender differences between pre-adolescents and perhaps was a part of a social engineering strategy used to stop them from viewing themselves as sexual beings at least until they had completed secondary school.

Savvas wondered if the girl was Prisana's daughter. It was common for women to be raising children without a spouse in Thailand. Savvas met many bar girls in Patong who conceived children with foreign tourists and decided to raise them. Some of the bar girls used photos of a child to extort money from the father when he returned to his country of origin. Unbeknown to the foreign tourist the child was not the girl's but one of her friends. Savvas had also heard that Thai women were often abandoned by their Thai husbands and boyfriends after they conceived as raising a child was an onerous financial burden, especially when many men only worked seasonally and had to endure long periods of unemployment. When they had paid work the remuneration was very low and a large part of their income went towards supporting their extended family of aged parents, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces and cousins. This left very little for themselves, which was then spent on drinking, gambling and whoremongering.

Many women who were impregnated were the 'mianoi's' of married Thai men. This status of being a minor wife entitled her to the see the Thai man occasionally as a lover, companion, and confidante. While she was presented gifts and measured financial support, she enjoyed none of the conjugal privileges attendant in a primary relationship as a marriage. Laws of inheritance, common law rights over separation and custodial authority of children only applied to women who were legally married. When a 'mianoi' became pregnant she alone was responsible for raising the child and often forfeited her status as the minor wife. The arrangement of having a minor wife was widely accepted socially in Thai society even at the highest social levels.

From King Rama to the Crown Prince, the nobility was renowned for their romantic entanglements and intrigues. The Crown Prince had many wives – major and minor – with a coterie of concubines for entertainment. One of his recent wives was exiled with her entire family, including a son they conceived together, for an undisclosed indiscretion. He subsequently remarried with another woman and fathered another child. It was rumoured that if the prince fell in love with one of his minor wives and she betrayed him, she and her family would disappear with their name, familial lineage and all vestiges of their existence expunged forever.

"Who's the girl in the photo Prisana?"

"Oh, that's my niece. She lives in Nongpakjig."

"How old is she?"

"When the photo was taken she was about one and a half years old. Now she is six years old."

"Do you see her often?"

"I go home to my family – my mother, father and brother – about two times a year usually at the of each semester. She lives with my family."

"Her parents?"

"She is an orphan. Her mother died when she was about eight months old and her father died five months later."

"That's tragic. Were they unusual circumstances?"

"They died of AIDS."

"Both of them?"

"Yes."

"How did that happen?"

"Its very common for men and women in my province to be HIV positive. There is a town, less than an hour from my town where almost all of the young girls have been recruited to work in the sex industry in Bangkok and the southern provinces including Phuket. When the girls return home they are usually carriers of the AIDS virus. Sometimes the men in the village are engaged as contact labourers in the southern provinces. They contract AIDS from the prostitutes they see there. When they return to their villagers in the north they come back with the virus which they pass onto children when they have sex with their wives and conceive children."

"How many?"

"What do you mean?"

"How many girls are carriers?"

"Well, in that village, the generation of young girls and boys before the current one was almost entirely wiped out by AIDS."

Savvas felt unsettled by the grim statistics. Prisana talked about the mortality rate with such dispassionate attachment. He recognised he was near the epicentre of what in Western countries was regarded the most devastating epidemic in the world. The Western media always reported news about AIDS in highly emotive and alarmist terms. Savvas was starting to believe that the media was exaggerating the extent of infection rates for the purposes of creating hysteria and generating higher viewer ratings. Now, for the first time, he was confronted with the truth without the media manipulation.

It was disturbing to be presented primary information that was raw and brutal. The horror of the information was not dissembled by politicians, deconstructed by academics or finessed by journalists. Savvas waited for the tormenting guilt and harrowing anguish to take its unrelenting grip. After all, he had contributed to this human tragedy by engaging the services of bargirls. Instead, the truth had cauterised his natural emotional outpouring. The rain outside had stopped. Savvas' clothes were dry. He left in his jeep driving along the service road. There was stillness in the air. The storm had passed and Savvas was feeling cathartic.

Chapter Twelve

When Savvas arrived at the university the next morning he found another note from Prisana on his desk. The note thanked him for his company the night before and invited him to paint with her that evening. Savvas smiled and folded the note back up and placed it in his bag. Kane Lambin, who must have arrived much earlier, sat at his desk, riveted to the screen of his laptop. Norman was away from his desk.

"Good morning Kane."

"Good morning."

"I've noticed you spending some time with Prisana."

"Yeah, we have been doing some things together."

"You'll never get anywhere with her. She gives the impression that she is interested but never allows it to go any further." Kane continued to appear absorbed by his work on his laptop not lifting his head up to make eye contact with Savvas.

"Oh, really?" Savvas recognised that Kane may have observed Prisana in the two years that he was working in the Institute of Languages, preceding his own appointment. He decided to solicit more information from Kane. He did not want to reveal to Kane that he viewed the relationship that was developing with Prisana as potentially a serious romantic involvement.

"She's very friendly."

"Yeah, and flirtatious. She led me on for a while."

"She is an interesting girl. She's articulate and intelligent and very talented. Have you seen her paintings?"

"She does paint very well."

"I have noticed that in Patong there are many galleries that sell reproductions of well known artworks.

The Thai men who make these copies are very skilled at reproducing existing masterpieces. However, they do not create any original artwork. They seem to posses technical skills but display almost no creative impulses or ability. What is Prisana's work like?"

"Prisana's work is very good. She has considerable talent."

"Does she paint original compositions?"

"Yes, her work is original. Come and have a look."

"Pardon."

"Here on my laptop. Come and have a look."

Savvas stood up and walked out from behind his desk. He walked the few feet that separate his desk from Kane 's at the other side of the large office. Kane motioned his laptop around so Savvas could get an unencumbered view. On the screen was a large gallery of small icons. Each icon was a reduced photographic image of a painting Prisana had produced. There were hundreds of icons. Kane ran the cursor over one of the images and clicked his mouse. The image of the painting was enlarged to fill the full size of the screen on his laptop computer. It

was a scene of a seascape at dusk with rolling sand dunes peppered with tufts of grass in the foreground and a thin horizon line rippling the sky with bands of twilight pink, blue and tangerine in the background. Kane clicked on many images that displayed seasidelandscape, sunrise and sunsets and the sky at dusk and dawn.

"Has she taken you to see the sunrise yet?"

"No."

Kane clicked on another image and enlarged it to a full screen size. It was another seascape - a beach at sunrise. There were three figures sitting on the sand. Savvas looked closer at the image. He saw a girl sitting in between two men. The figures were close. Savvas was curious but was careful to disguise his interest in Prisana as simply voyeuristic. "Who are they?"

"On the left is me, in the middle is Prisana and on the right is Georgio."

"Georgio?"

"Georgio was an Italian teacher with the Institute of Languages. He left in March. She produced a painting for him and for me."

"I see." Savvas sensed that Kane was about to reveal something to him. Kane stood up and closed the office door. He sat down at his desk and continued to appear absorbed by his work.

"Ok, what I'm going to tell you stays here. You cannot tell her I have spoken to you."

Savvas wanted to learn as much as he could about Prisana. He knew she may have jilted Kane and any revelations he may have would be embellished by his injured pride. However, Savvas' desire to know was powerful. "Sure, I sensed that there may have been something about that girl."

"Georgio was the Italian teacher at the institute. He arrived in July last year while his British girlfriend arrived two months later. She was offered work by the institute to teach Spanish. Prisana formed an illicit relationship with him during the two months he was living in the staff accommodation complex. When his British girlfriend, Madeleine, arrived she sensed something was going on and confronted Prisana. The truth came out and the relationship stopped. I lost respect for Prisana because she lied so extensively to conceal the secret affair. She lied to all of her work colleagues."

"His girlfriend Madeleine must have been hurt by the revelation."

"Deeply hurt. What made it worse was that Prisana and Georgio maintained that nothing happened between them."

"You mean they denied the affair?"

"Not entirely. They just insisted that they were never sexually intimate."

"Were they sexually intimate?"

"Well, Georgio told me they were."

"What was it like in the office during that period with everyone working so closely?"

"Fireworks! There were screaming hysterics and ongoing melodramatics for some time as everyone suspected that they continued to communicate surreptitiously."

"Why do you think she did it - I mean I presume she must have known that Georgio had a British girlfriend who was to arrive imminently."

"I don't know. What offended me was that she would walk with me on campus and curl her arm through mine while stepping closer to me when she would see students. I felt like trophy of some sort. We also had dinner together, listened to music in her apartment and watched the sunrise. Then Georgio arrived and I started to suspect that something was going on between them. I found out that she is a skilful liar and is very clever at obfuscation. She used me as a cover to continue to see Georgio publicly. That I really resented.

Savvas felt that the intuitive suspicions that he had about Prisana might now have been proved substantiated. He knew he would have to reflect on the revelations taking into account that Kane Lambin may have been prejudiced. However, he also recognised that Kane was generally honest. Perhaps not in the way that someone may feel morally compelled to tell the truth but because he was extensively exposed to the culture of law enforcement institutions as a former member of the armed services, a police officer and a prison guard. He assimilated the institutional values and limited social frameworks of those highly regulated domains as apersonal belief system. Kane saw the world as an extended Hollywood movie where he was an honest man in a violent, corrupt world.

"There is also a rumour that she had an affair with a student. It seems that the student was of average ability but somehow managed to be awarded an excellent final semester result. Prisana was his teacher and they seemed very close."

Savvas had noticed that Prisana was unguarded and uninhibited with students. She seemed closer to her students than other teachers, touching them in a manner that ostensibly appeared friendly and supportive. They were always gathering around her after class and between classes to socialise. Most of these students were boys. Perhaps, Savvas thought, Prisana was conceited and enjoyed manipulating the attention of men as playthings. She was well paid compared to most of her male and female peers, enjoyed an elevated stature as a university academic and was resentful of the subservient role of women in Thai society. She may have usurped the prerogatives and indulgences of the patrician class of Thai men in a perverse reversal of social roles.

"Anyhow, that is very sensitive information so be careful," Kane continued.

"Do you think she could be trusted in a relationship?"

"Well, it doesn't appear that she wants to deceive anyone for money - unlike most Thai girls. However, I don't think she would respect any commitment made as a wife as she did not observe the fact that Georgio was committed to another woman with whom he had been with for four years." Kane stood up and shuffled some loose leaf papers he had on his desk. "I need to head off to class."

It was the end of day and Savvas walked out of the building where he worked in the Institute of Languages and down the stairs. He walked through a large open space where students assembled before going into the auditorium. The open space was lined with benches and resonated with the chatter of conversation between classes. As it was partially walled the acoustics were resounding. Students presented musical and theatrical productions on a small stage within this quadrangle.

As he walked his thoughts turned to Prisana. He remembered the first time he met her. A large group of foreign teachers joined the Thai staff at a restaurant. The department head took the opportunity to be host to new and old staff before the official start of the first semester of the academic year. While the conversation was desultory at best there was a divinity shaping their ends unbeknown to all of them. At that table personal and

professional agendas were being formed that would have consequences beyond the small dominions of their role as educators.

Savvas walked along a path that led to a small road that traversed the campus from the gated entrance to the student dormitories. His small Caribean jeep was parked in the baking sun where the path met the road. He made this familiar walk each day on arrival and when he left for the day. On the side of the path near a thicket was a large Frangipani tree. It lavished magnificent floral specimens on the luxuriant grass beneath the swaying branches. The flowers had sumptuous white petals stretching to embrace the sun. The yellow pigment blotches that were splashed in the middle of the flower glowed gloriously.

Sometimes, in the morning, moisture formed droplets of water on the petals. Through the day more flowers fell from the tree. By noon, dozens of Frangipani flowers embellished the green lawn like topaz jewels burning in the meridian sun. There was some strange symmetry in their distribution on the grass. Sometimes he would think that someone had come out here before the dawn and spread them out judiciously across the grass. The flowers would be perfectly still, glistening, glowing. And dead.

Savvas' head was filled with the immortal and redolent fragrance of flowers. Prisana seemed fond of these flowers. He always saw her collect the finest specimens and place them carefully into a plastic bag. Savvas often wondered whether she did this deliberately to give him the impression she was sensitive and caring. On the surface she seemed the perfect specimen. She was educated, gracious, beautiful. She radiated an effortless charm that delighted and beguiled. She seemed to be reaching out to achieve so much with nothing but raw, unbridled ambition.

Prisana's achievements were commendable in view of the challenges faced by someone whose family farmed rice in the valleys of Chiang Rai. Prisana had shown him a picture of her house and school. The school was a kilometre from her family homestead, a rambling ramshackle wooden house elevated on stilts. The school was a stone building with small windows that looks out onto bristling rice paddies. It took considerable imagination for a child to dream of a world beyond the distant mountains that appeared like undulating silhouettes and formed a great wall along the horizon.

Many of her contemporaries simply didn't finish secondary school. Their families were crippled by generational debt that was a form of unshakeable

bondage. These families were subsistence farmers. Education, health and housing expenses were serviced by loans that were never extinguished because of the impact of the vagaries of the harvest cycle on the propensity of the families to save money. In a neighbouring district most of the young girls had been ostensibly recruited to work as maids for wealthy families in the south but in fact were forced to work as prostitutes.

Agents representing organised crime factions in the south would visit small villages in the north where poverty was acute. They would present offers of employment to young girls in hospitality, tourism and the service industry. Sometimes they would use girls who were employed previously to sponsor them to return home to their respective villagers and recruit other girls. These girls would return with considerable money, gold, jewellery and branded clothes. Other times, the families of girls were often given loans and their daughters were employed in lieu of payment on the loan. The girls would be enslaved to a business elsewhere in the south and forced to work without remuneration until the loan was payed off.

Prisana seemed to escape this fate, Savvas thought. While she was not seduced into the sex industry as a sex worker she did, in her own way, become obsessed with foreigners and the glamorous world they

came from. In some respects she may have been the mistress of many foreign men but without the conventional immediate payment for services rendered. It was never clear if she had sex with these men or not. This became unimportant. The betrayal of her own culture occurred when she decide to renounce her identity as a Thai woman and assimilate Western values. Prisana was angling for a bigger prize - a life of security and opportunity in a developed country in the first world.

Savvas' phone rang. "Hi Savvas, I'm painting tonight and wondered if you would like to be with me. I can teach you a few strokes."

"Yes, I got your note. Sure, why not." Savvas was ambivalent about Prisana. He knew she might be manipulating him. However, he was not absolutely sure. If she was, she concealed her agenda very well. He would be cautious.

After spending the early evening burning candles and incense and listening to music Prisana stretched two blank canvases out onto two wooden frames. She sat one down on an easel on her balcony while she placed the other down on the back of a chair. She lay out some tubes of oil paints in front of Savvas and invited him to start. She sat in front of her own blank canvas and began to paint.

After some hours of laboured effort Savvas stood up and turned his canvas around. He had produced a painting of a small boat being tossed and turned in stormy waters. The boat's sail was a silhouette of a woman's figure. Prisana had produced a painting of the upper torso of a naked woman. The woman had long brown hair and high, noble cheekbones. Her breasts radiated the warmth of gentle candlelight while soft shadows veiled her face with painted modesty. Their bodies writhed together entangled with lustful ferocity, cavorting until Savvas extinguished the solitary candle in the bedroom with his last breath that evening.

Chapter Thirteen

The mid-term exam was delivered in the auditorium. Two hundred and fifty students assembled there for three hours. The students devoted weeks of study to prepare for the exam. It was weighted heavily as a piece of assessment at forty percent of their final semester result. All the teachers dedicated several weeks of class time to preparing and revising for that day. Each teacher used their own methodology in presenting the fixed syllabus that Norman had largely dictated to the faculty. As Savvas was a new appointee he was reticent to object to any components of the course as presented by Norman. Savvas recognised that Kane had allowed Norman to enjoy considerable liberties in designing the course. This may have been to relieve himself of the responsibilities. Kane and Savyas supervised the exam

together. At the completion of the exam they collected all papers in large brown paper bags embossed with the university crest and returned to the offices. As the hour was late they agreed to start correcting them the following day.

When Savvas arrived in the morning, Kane and Norman were correcting exam papers. The papers were separated into groups and formed large piles on each teacher's desk. Savvas sat down at his desk and looked at the brown paper bags. He opened one of them and pulled out an examination paper. The paper belonged to a student from group A - a group that Kane had taught through the semester. He looked at a few more exam papers and saw that al of them were from group A.

"We are all correcting a section each, said Kane." Savvas looked over at Norman who continued to read and mark the exam paper before him. Norman did nothing to acknowledge Savvas' presence in the room. "You have the essay part Savvas."

"Fine," replied Savvas

Thirty minutes had passed and the three of them continued to diligently assess the papers. Occasionally

Norman would be heard to express minor irritation with a student failing to complete a section properly or misunderstand the instructions. More often he would marvel audibly at a student who wrote something that impressed him.

"Wow, these students try so hard. I wish students in America were like this. Sometimes the little rascals copy each other. They try so hard to impress me. With the right teaching methodologies they could really shine."

Savvas knew that the comment was an oblique reference to him. Norman was always posturing to remind other teachers about his research into new approaches in pedagogy. Norman had vehemently objected to the free spirited approach Savvas took with his students from classroom methodologies to test and assignment structures. Norman had written an academic paper where he concluded that a learner centred approach to education allowed students to be empowered with classroom decision making around their own interests and objectives. Savvas saw the new approach as simply a minor cyclical realignment in an ongoing assessment and reassessment of different approaches to teaching worldwide. It was also a by-product of post-modern democratic models of organisation where the individual's consciousness was considered sovereign. History was

littered with auto-didacts and many of them were looking down at Norman from the elevated bookcase next to his office desk.

It occurred to Savvas that Norman may have been using the results from the mid-term exam to prove a hypothesis he may have formulated and applied to a research project he was undertaking. After all, Norman seemed obsessed with the standardisation of all tests, assignments and exams. He insisted that all students sit in the same room - the auditorium - to take the examination even though this required significant preparation. This also inconvenienced many students who had expected to take the exam during the last scheduled lesson of the semester in the same room that they undertook all their lessons in that subject. However, he had no control over the teaching presuming his students did in fact perform better in the examination.

"Well, your students are doing very well Savvas." It was the first time Norman had spoken to him since their earlier confrontation.

"Are they?"

"Yeah, they're getting very high scores in the multiple choice section."

"And the short answer section," added Kane.

"Well, that's encouraging," Savvas said.

"My students are quite uneven," continued Kane.

Norman shook his head and looked dejected. "My students are really struggling. Although the groups I have been teaching were identified by the results of the placement test as being some of the weakest academically."

"So were Savvas'," added Kane.

"Yeah, that's right. Savvas' groups are the weakest according to the placement test. So how is it they are doing so well in the exam?" Norman turned his head and looked over to Savvas whose desk was only six feet away. His deliberate, unflinching glare was unnerving.

"Perhaps he is just a better teacher than us," said Kane.

Norman continued to stare at Savvas. "Well, how did you do it?"

Savvas looked over at Kane who was now

reclining back in his chair and looking over at Savvas. Norman's eyes were penetrating. There was also madness in them that revealed a malicious intent that Savvas knew he would have to one day confront.

"My students did well on their inter-semester quizzes and tests. To me it is no surprise that they have performed well on the mid-term examination."

Kane looked incredulous. "Savvas, your students were ranked to be the weakest out of all two hundred and fifty freshmen according to the initial placement test. Their performance is very conspicuous."

"And Kane's students have been ranked as the most able out of all the groups and yet they are not performing as well as your students Savvas," added Norman. "There is also some similarity in their answers that may, on face value, suggest that they may have cheated," mused Kane.

Norman raised his hand to get Kane's attention. "How many students answered all multiple choice questions correctly except the one question where they all made the same mistake?"

"About five students," calculated Kane.

Savvas detected a sinister level of coordination between Kane and Norman. "What does that prove? Sounds like an insignificant statistical correlation drawn from a very large group of results. It signifies nothing."

"Well then, how would you explain that from the five students who made the same single mistake out of all multiple choice questions all five students also chose the same incorrect answer when presented six different answers to choose from in that one question?"

Savvas recognised that he was the target of a conspiracy planned by Kane and Norman. He wondered what their motive could be. They were both Americans. Did they harbour resentment towards teachers from other countries? Did they disapprove of his teaching methodologies as irregular and unconventional? Kane seemed accommodating and helpful, Savvas thought, when he first met him. Did Norman influence Kane by contaminating him with false information?

Savvas made an effort to conceal his indignation at the implications of the discussion. "I don't know. I would have to see the questions."

"I am going to lock these up and continue to assess them after lunch," Kane announced. He looked at

Norman. "I'm not looking forward to dealing with this. It's going to be awkward."

"Yeah. The results will tell," added Norman enigmatically. Norman and Kane left the office for lunch. Savvas sat at his desk and reflected on the discussion. Prisana entered the office.

"Hi Savvas. Going out for lunch?"

"I have lost my appetite."

"Is everything alright?"

"I have just been ambushed by Norman and Kane."

"What do you mean?"

"We have been correcting exam papers. It seems my students are getting higher results than Kane and Norman's students. They have suggested my students have cheated."

"Do they have evidence?"

"A statistical correlation between five students."

"Out of two hundred and fifty freshmen that hardly sounds conclusive. What do they want to do about it?"

"I'm not sure. We intend to continue when they return from lunch."

"Fine. Let me know if you need my help. I'm going to lunch."

"Thanks, Prisana."

When Kane and Norman returned from lunch it was clear that they spent more time preparing their case. Without saying another word to Savvas they ploughed into the remaining examination papers. Savvas continued correcting his exam papers. Finally Norman stood up and walked over to Kane. He showed Kane an exam paper. They mumble something and Norman returned to his desk.

Norman removed his glasses and placed them down on his desk. "Which of these options could be regarded as the best definition for the word 'transmit'?"

Savvas looked up and saw that Norman was directing the question at him. "Pardon?"

"In ascertaining the meaning of a word from its context, students were presented with the sentence, 'Mosquitoes transmit sleeping sickness through biting'. They were then asked to select a word from four alternatives - spread, enjoy, cure, find - to best describe the meaning of the word transmit. Which do you think is the right answer?"

"Spread, of course. mosquitoes spread disease, don't they?"

"I have been thinking about this a have concluded that 'find' is also acceptable in that context."

Savvas looked perplexed. "I have never encountered that usage of the word 'find' before. Surely the obvious answer is 'spread'.

"Why is it obvious?" baited Norman.

"Well, it is what most people would associate with the word."

"Yeah, but we mustn't impose our cultural perspectives on these students. Remember that these students have different backgrounds, traditions and belief systems. The word 'find' may be more legitimate to them

than 'spread'. We should have two answers to the question I think," suggested Norman."

Kane referred to the same question in one of the papers he was marking. "If we adopted that approach Norman, then many questions and answers would be moot, wouldn't they?"

"Well, they are the learners. We must recognise that our academic traditions have been contaminated with Western values. We must adapt to accommodate their interpretation of the world. If this means that there may be two possible answers then we have to accept that."

This was absurd thought Savvas. Norman's suggestion was preposterous. He was uncompromising in the past when it came to answers in tests. He even insisted on producing answer keys. Hisposition was that there was only one possible answer and this served the interests of fairness to all students. Now he was trying to persuade Savvas that there might be several different acceptable answers. He must have had another reason for wanting to award two correct answers to the exam question. "Can I have a look at the exam paper more closely?"

Norman passed over the exam paper, opened at the page where the question relating to inferring meaning

from context was located. Savvas read the question and saw that Norman was up to something. There was only one answer that was clear and unambiguous. Savvas looked at the name on the front of the exam paper - it was one of his own students. Norman knew this too. Norman, Savvas realised, was trying to manipulate the results to be higher for this student and perhaps others. This would provide additional students to the list that Kane had made of students with unusually high results - sometimes with the same mistakes - reinforcing his statistical correlation that they cheated. Savvas concealed his suspicions and continued to present himself as indifferent to the discussion.

"Right, I'm done," said Kane.

"I am finished too," echoed Norman.

"How are you doing Savvas?"

"I finished a while ago."

Kane collated all the papers. "Well, let's tabulate the results and graph them. We should expect to see a nice bell shaped curve of distribution."

When Savvas returned after delivering a three hour lecture to students he found Norman and Kane looking decidedly self-satisfied. There was a graph on the office whiteboard board that did not show a classic bell shaped curve. Instead it showed there was a significant anomaly of students who performed very well beyond how the majority performed.

"Please sit down Savvas," invited Kane. "We have reason to believe that there was a significant amount of cheating in one of your groups - in fact the group we had talked about earlier."

"You mean the students who were deemed weak by the placement test?"

"Yes."

"How do you know they cheated?"

"Well, there were several perfect scores on the exam amongst the two hundred and fifty students. Nearly all of them were in the one group - your group Savvas. Moreover, a small group of students who obtained near perfect scores all made the same mistake and I mean exactly the same mistake. Your students on average performed thirty per cent better than my students and at

least forty per cent better than Norman's students."

"Well, that's a significant difference," Savvas said sardonically.

"Should we get them in here?" asked Norman.

"I think we should," agreed Kane. " It will prove that they got help to achieve those results."

"With your experience as a police officer Kane we should be able to get them to confess very quickly." Norman was winding Kane up with compliments.

"Tell a lie to get a truth," Kane muttered.

"I bet that that technique has worked well for you in the service."

"Especially when we were interrogating a group of offenders. It was always effective to interview them individually and inform one person that another member of their group had singled them out as being the guilty party. This would trigger counter accusations that would be revealing and incriminating."

"Wow, that's so clever Kane."

"What I propose is that we call in the suspected group of students and interrogate them in the office one by one using the same technique."

Norman was nodding his head in agreement. "We must get to the bottom of this. It is an egregious act of treachery."

"As they are your students Savvas can you ask them to come into the office?" Kane was distancing himself from the proposal. He had taken the initiative so far in finding the irregularities. Savvas found it curious that he would want to take a subordinate role now.

"I'm sorry Kane but I do not feel comfortable inviting my students in to the office to be interrogated by you and Norman. I do not even see any significance in the conclusions you have made from your statistical investigation. As far as I can see there was a cluster of students who had similar results. This could be because the questions were drafted in a way that created those circumstances or because the students studied together or perhaps it was happenstance. You identified a correlation from an enormous group of other results that if examined more closely would probably produce other correlation no more significant than the first correlation."

Kane scowled with contention. "We can do that if you like. I can spend a few days with the results and prove to you that this is a significant correlation."

"I also disagree in principle to treating students like suspects in a crime. These are Thai students whose parents have paid a considerable amount of money to have their kids educated. They will not take kindly to accusations of impropriety - especially unsubstantiated ones."

"Should we tell him?" asked Norman.

"Well I was going to keep this until later Savvas. These are not unsubstantiated accusations. In fact, since you are not willing to cooperate may I inform you that we have a witness that says you were seen giving an exam paper to students. It seems these students then prepared their revision based on that exam paper.

Savvas was defiant. "Produce him."

"Pardon me," Kane said, disdainfully.

"If you have a witness bring him forward." Savvas was confident that Kane was adopting his technique of telling a lie to get a truth. Kane was trying to manipulate

Savvas into making a confession.

"We are not going to allow you to know who it is. The witness wants to remain anonymous. Instead we will present the evidence to Ajarn Benjawan and request you resignation."

Savvas chose not to provoke Kane any further. It was clear to Savvas that Kane was carrying out the steps to methodically prosecute a crime as he saw it. Kane was primed by his service experience and training and finally activated by Norman. His thought processes and behaviour were refined to smaller, automatic and rehearsed actions combined together like the components of a pistol to deliver justice swiftly.

Kane stood up and stormed indignantly out of the office. Norman followed smiling smugly. Savvas reflected on what had transpired in the office and felt confused. He walked out of the office to visit the washroom when he almost collided with Norman coming from the other direction. As they passed each other Savvas turned to look at Norman.

"Norman, you really know how to wind Kane up. Is that really necessary? Can you tell me what all of this is about?

Norman stopped and turned around to face Savvas. He walked towards Savvas stopping only an inch before him. He leaned forward, his nose touching Savvas'. His eyes rolled up into their sockets. He stared at Savvas unflinchingly. Savvas, who was several inches shorter held his gaze for a few seconds and then took a step backwards.

Savvas was shaken. "Is that your answer to my question?"

"You don't deserve an answer." Norman said chillingly and walked away.

Savvas never experienced the cold-blooded hate that Norman seemed to have for him. There was something almost unearthly about his icy contempt. He carried it around with him like a prejudice. He had not been wounded yet behaved as if had. Was he lashing out at the world for a wound sustained at another time and place? Was his missing finger a part of this mystery? What role did Kane have in all of these intrigues and how where his personal interests being served? Did Norman perceive a threat to his well being or self-interest? What then was in fact was Norman's self-interest? Were Kane and Norman collaborating to publish a research study into learner centred teaching methodologies?

Chapter Fourteen

Kata beach was a natural bay on the south eastern peninsula of the island of Phuket. It was perfectly framed by two headlands that consisted of rocky escarpments battered by crested waves. Strong currents rippled the water and presented a danger to the small sailing boats that glittered like fragments of coloured glass on a flat temporal plane. The Andaman Sea's azure waters unravelled effortlessly onto the sandy shoreline paying homage to the monumental six star resort hotels that had been developed on commanding outcrops of land along the east coast. These thin strips of sand were where the international leisure class came to build their golden thrones of pleasure and sit, beholden to their vanity, holding court with the sun, sand and sea. They built castles in the sand while old women, raw-boned and buckled with

age spruiked silk tapestries in the beating sun, small boys trudged barefooted through blistering sand hauling ice and young girls provided massage services to corpulent voluptuaries of the sun.

Savvas spent the next day at the beach. He arrived in the morning before the club Med Habitues. He fell asleep in the scorching sun and sustained serious sunburn to his legs. He felt paralysed from the waist down as his skin radiated the heat of the sun. The recent confrontation with Norman echoed in his mind. He was sullen with remorse because he was not more aggressive with Norman. In his delirium he vacillated between hating himself and hating Norman.

Savvas was thinking about the challenge to his position at the university and was worried about how a dismissal may reflect on his prospective chances of getting employment at another university. He resented Kane and Norman for their malicious accusations and considered complaining to the director of the Institute of Languages directly. He knew Prisana had worked with Ajarn Benjawan for many years and would know how to approach this situation with aplomb. He was reluctant to give Prisana the impression he was enthusiastic about seeing her again. He wanted to take a more cautious approach until he could clearly ascertain what sort of

person Prisana was in the wake of the damning revelations that Kane had made to him.

He dragged himself back to his mountain bungalow and collapsed on his bed. The searing pain of the sunburn began to intensify as the full extent of the sun's powerful rays began to radiate through his skin and tissue. Lying under the rotating ceiling fan his contempt for Norman wound and wound more tightly. He began to feel indignant at the audacity of Norman in standing over him in the corridor. He wondered if Norman went away from the incident feeling pleased with himself. The unflinching eye contact was tantamount to intimidation and abuse. He invaded the personal space that each individual regards as sacrosanct. His behaviour was unprofessional and possibly unlawful Savvas thought. It deserved redress.

That evening Prisana visited Savvas at his bungalow in Kata. She had brought freshly cut aloevera to soothe his burns. The medium sized pieces were fleshy and moist despite having been chilled in the refrigerator for several hours. The aloevera was the perfect alm to soothe sun burn. It was recognised for absorbing heat and reducing the high temperature of scalded tissue. It was abundantly available in Phuket and was a common source of relief for a medley of tropical maladies.

"Stay still, Savvas."

"Easy does it Prisana, it hurts."

"I know it hurts but this is the best thing for you." Prisana gingerly lowered a piece of alovera onto Savvas' foot.

"Aaagh! Slowly please I said."

"Why did you stay in the sun without protection for so long?"

"I fell asleep."

"Next time you should apply some lotion even if you are in the sun for a short period." She put down a second and third piece of aloevera moving slowly up Savvas' leg with the intention of covering the entire leg.

"How are things between you and Kane and Norman?"

"Catastrophic. Kane is calling for my resignation."

"Really? On what grounds?"

"He has accused my students of cheating. In fact he has made it clear that he believes that I gave then an exam paper."

Prisana placed another piece of aloevera down on Savvas' leg. She was now administering the aloevera to his thigh area. "Savvas, I need to tell you something about Kane. He may resent you because of my interest in you. Has he observed us together?"

"Yes, in fact. He has actually asked whether we were seeing each other."

"Be very careful with him Savvas. He is a dangerous man."

"In what way?"

"He has been emotionally unstable since I rejected his romantic overtures." Prisana started applying the aloevera to Savvas' other leg.

"He loved you?"

"Yes. He was obsessed with me. When he realised that I was not interested in him he became petty and has since tried to interfere with my personal life."

"In what way?"

"Well, he hacked into my personal e-mail account."

"He also tried to injure my reputation by circulating malicious rumours about me." Prisana lifted another piece of aloevera off the plate and lowered it down on Savvas' lower leg.

"What sort of rumours?"

"Well, I was going to tell you this anyway. Last year I made a terrible mistake. It was one of the wost periods of my life. I was depressed for months. To this day I am very ashamed for the complications and injured feelings I created."

"What did you do?"

"I got involved with a teacher who arrived to teach Italian. We saw each other for two months."

"What was his name?"

"Georgio."

"Why was it a source of shame?"

"He had a girlfriend Savvas."

"Oh, I see."

"I still can't explain today why I let it happen." Prisana was now working on Savvas' upper leg. She had covered all the exposed skin with the aloevera on nearly both legs. The vegetable was absorbing the intense heat like a leach sucking blood. It relieved Savvas of his excruciating pain and revitalised the damaged skin tissue.

"Look Prisana, there no need to explain. It really isn't my business and is your personal business."

"I just feared that Kane may have said something to you."

"He did talk about it a little. I didn't pay much attention."

"See. I knew he would."

"It doesn't matter Prisana."

"It does Savvas."

"As long as you are secure about your own feelings then what he thinks or says is of no importance."

"Right. I just wanted you to know that nothing happened between Georgio and me."

Savvas arched his eyebrows with incredulity. This was in conflict with what Kane had told him. However, Kane it seemed had his own motives for embellishing the truth. Savvas wondered, was it possible two consenting adults in their thirties would not be sexually intimate over a period of two months?

"Really, nothing did happen. We just lay in bed sobbing most of the time. We were confused and frightened."

"Right, ok," Savvas said, unconvincingly.

"Hugging and kissing, that's all." Prisana stood up and walked over to the kitchen. When she returned she looked over at Savvas who smiled knowingly.

"Do you want to know how we kissed? She asked mockingly.

Savvas felt ashamed for feeling jealous. After all,

the relationship with Georgio occurred before she met him. Somehow Savvas wasn't quite comfortable with her explanation. He accepted that she would want to be modest and present herself in the best possible light to a new boyfriend but she could have simply declined to discuss the relationship in any detail instead of making the claims she did. Savvas was confused. He didn't know if Kane was lying or Prisana was lying. Savvas knew that as Prisana had been sexually intimate with him that it was more than likely she would have been sexually intimate with Georgio as well. Savvas could not help but think that Prisana was in fact lying to him. He knew then that he would have difficulty trusting her. He was relieved and disappointed.

Chapter Fifteen

On Monday morning Prisana and Savvas arrived to the university together. Prisana had stayed the weekend administering relief to Savvas from his pain. It was a public holiday and the university was deserted. Prisana agreed to speak to the director of the institute privately about the allegations made by Norman and Kane the previous week. Savvas went into the office and decided to clear his desk and relocate to other offices elsewhere on the fifth floor. Prisana was good enough to identify an unoccupied desk in the offices she occupied with two other language teachers. He sat at the computer to check his e-mail. When he turned the computer on he recognised there was a floppy disc in the hard drive. He wondered if he had left his own diskette in the computer

last week when he was working on the exam. He clicked on the floppy disk icon on the screen and opened the diskette. It was a letter:

Dear Dad,

It has been ten years since we spoke. I wanted to write to you to tell you how my life has developed. I am in Thailand. I am working as a university lecturer. You were right - our lives are predestined and we all have a special destiny to fulfil. Yours was to serve the Mormon church. Mine is to change the course of history in Thailand as a missionary. I am being led by my personal guide - my Kwan - through many trials and tests in the passage of my life. My wounds and my failures as a brother, husband and son have helped me to know myself and lead me towards fulfilling my role in the great drama of my life. My spiritual guide has spoken to me through symbols I have seen and the through the symmetry of events and has shown me what I must do now.

On my travels around the world I abandoned secular beliefs and material possessions in favour of

fulfilling my glorious destiny. There is an ancient tribe of islanders in the Andaman archipelago between India and Thailand. They believe that the less you have the stronger you are; if you are indeed strong then you need less personal belongings, weapons, comforts etc. to survive. In Western countries the people with the most possessions are perceived as the strongest. Well, I have renounced everything I had in America - career, marriage, house and now feel omnipotent.

When I took the islanders the gift of power and presented it to the shaman I knew that I might help protect them against the diseases of civilisation. The images on the walls in the cave were over ten thousand years old. I matched my left hand to the ten thousand year-old year old stencil on the wall and proved I am part of some mystery of survival our ancestors used but modern history has forgotten.

My birthdate is the same day the Education Reform Act of Thailand was passed. This is my mandate to usher in the Age of the Learner in schools and universities throughout Thailand by translating the policies and guidelines in the Education Reform Act into learning models, objectives and teaching methodologies. I intend to empower Thai students with self-determination allowing them to take

responsibility for the decision making in the classroom and their lives.

Thailand has become a battleground for competing and conflicting ideologies and belief systems. Western secularism, Christianity, Muslim fundamentalism and Buddhist traditions are trying to grow roots in a land of soil-cracked poverty. Despite its modern infrastructure and burgeoning commercialisation, Thailand is still a feudal state. The Thai language perpetuates a class system that promotes subservience and acquiescence while Buddhist culture creates apathy and acceptance. Absolute monarchy gave way to constitutional monarchy about eighty years ago. Since then, the experiment with democratic elections has been littered with coups and crises while the standard of education has fallen. I will change all of this by nurturing the next generation with autonomous, learner-centred educational practices.

Your Son,

Norman Detering

Savvas was shocked at the contents of the letter. The signature at the bottom indicated that Norman Black was an assumed name. He was using a false name to conceal a criminal record or perhaps a record of institutional therapy as psychiatric patient. Norman was a dangerous man, thought Savvas. Because of his anonymity he was in a position to harm others with impunity. It all started to make sense to him. Savvas remembered the conversation with Diver about the cannibals on North Sentinel Island. These were the same islanders Norman must have visited to show them the photographs of the cave drawings that were on his bookshelf. He must have cut off his finger and presented it to them as an offering. Savvas replaced the floppy disk into the disk drive and left the room.

Norman's private obsession was a product of his past, Savvas thought. Norman had set out to protect students from the tyranny of democracy. His heart pined for the small minorities in democratic models of political organisation, who were marginalised by the majority. He characterised Western culture as imperialistic and believed he was been divinely ordained - his birthdate being he same as the enactment date of the Educational Reform Act of Thailand - to protect Thai students from the homogenising influences of the free market and mass media communications.

What appeared to be a progressive step in introducing fashionable teaching methodologies in a country atrophied by arcane structures of learning was in fact a diabolical strategy to manipulate students into believing they were making a free, independent decision when they made a choice between two competing brands - or ideologies. It was a false choice, of course, as they were only given a limited, controlled selection and misled into believing they were exercising freedom of choice. Norman Black was interested in domination not freedom.

It was almost lunchtime when Prisana announced that she was leaving early for the day. She said she was going home to her apartment to complete a painting she was preparing - a special gift to Savvas. Savvas decided to continue working in the new offices he found himself. His discovery of Norman's floppy disk aroused his interest in finding out more about Prisana. Savvas sat in front of the computer terminal that the teachers in that room must have been sharing while they occupied that office. He ran a search on the hard drive for documents containing the word 'Georgio'. He was flabbergasted with the litany of correspondence between Prisana and Georgio that was saved to the computer.

He started to open and read each document. Most were dated from September onwards - in other

words, after Georgio's girlfriend, Madeleine arrived at the university. The correspondence continued consistently until February the next year. It was clear to Savvas that Prisana and Georgio were corresponding and meeting secretly for at least six months after Madeleine arrived at the university. They seemed to wait for opportunities when Madeleine was teaching or visiting her friends to rendezvous. The e-mails revealed a passionate affair that was made more poignant by its illicit nature.

Savvas continued to read the e-mails. It seems Prisana was stricken with grief and jealousy when Madeleine arrived at the university and assumed his role as Madeleine's boyfriend. She wrote to Georgio about her anguish as a woman who was deeply in love with a man who would not choose between his girlfriend of four years and his secret paramour. She refused to remain a secret lover and in weaker moments accused Georgio of being selfish and uncaring. Georgio must have made promises to her and now it seemed as though she felt he had failed to honour them. Prisana vacillated between love and hate, passion and disgust. She resented the fact that Georgio was influenced by a sense of 'sin' and was riddled with guilt for betraying his girlfriend. However, she grudgingly agreed to wait for him to make up his mind.

In one e-mail Prisana wrote to Georgio about a

painting she had prepared for him. She spent days conceiving it and splashed it on a canvas in just hours. It was a work of inspired passion she wrote. She had seen Georgio in her dreams and woke in fear when she could not hold him. He seemed to just slowly disappear. After that she could not sleep. The hours until the dawn weakened her as they disintegrated with the memory of her dream. In the morning she woke determined to recapture the nocturnal apparition and stretched a canvas on a wooden frame and began conceiving. She managed to produce a nude portrait of a woman whose whole being was aroused by a potent, unseen presence. Savvas remembered the nude portrait Prisana painted for him that night in her apartment. He wondered whether the special painting Prisana was preparing for him that afternoon was on a canvas that was used before. He felt cheated and decided to return to his bungalow in Kata.

He sat in a big rattan chair on the large, vaulted balcony and reflected on the e-mails. His bungalow was situated on the slope of a small mountain. In the west, over a banana plantation, he could see Kata beach. The view in the south and east was festooned with tropical vegetation. Towering palm trees soared high above a formidable, multi-layered canopy. The undergrowth shaded sprawling insect empires and a small stream

babbled over moss-green rocks while insects hummed above. Nearer his bungalow, the soft branches of mango trees were weighed down by ripening fruit. The sinewy trunks of papaya trees were encrusted with fruit specimens of all sizes with ripening papayas falling to the ground. The pennant leaves of banana trees bowed and tilted with a creeping wind and cashew nut fruits turned like baubles in the sunlight.

On a low concrete wall beneath the balcony, where Orchids and Birds of Paradise postured vaingloriously and large clay pots filled with water bubbled with small frogs sunning themselves on the edges before diving in, Savvas recognised a large lizard moving very slowly. When the reptile was perfectly still it was hard to differentiate it from the rocky debris that pressed up against the concrete wall. It seemed to have assumed the coloured texture of the rocks and looked just like a smaller fragmented outcrop of the wall. It moved as if it knew it was being observed - a few centimetres forward and then stopped. Its garish head cranked left and right and then returned to its natural position. In a rapid succession of spit-fast movements it unfurled its ribbon shaped tongue. And then it stepped forward again.

Savvas stood up out of his chair and leaned over the iron railing of his balcony. He looked down at the wall

to get a better look at the lizard. It had vanished. It seemed like only a few seconds between the time he stood up out of his chair and leaned over the balcony. The lizard must have moved astonishingly fast to have crawled off the wall and onto the green foliage of smaller vegetation nearer the ground. Savvas took a closer more considered view of the foliage. He saw something move. The lizard was lying on a fallen banana leaf. Its stone-coloured complexion had changed to green - identical to the green colour of the banana leaf. The lizard was able to change its appearance to reflect the colours and textures of the surfaces it found itself on. No doubt, Savvas thought, this ability equipped it well to catch insects that would take the lizard as part of the flora and venture treacherously close. Suddenly, it seemed to sense that Savvas was observing and scurried off into the leafy undergrowth.

Chapter Sixteen

The ocean had a secret and it was revealed by the tide. Hundreds of kilometres off the west coast of the island mighty currents churned the depths while underwater colonies were turned upside down by swirling torrents. Great leviathans were tossed like minnows by the powerful undertow creating massive silent upheaval . A solitary bird circled high above in a steely bright sky. It swept around in a perfect arc of reconnaissance. It wasn't clear whether the bird identified some prey or was captivated by its own reflection. The surface of the water was still, as only deep water can be, belying the tumult beneath. The large body of water concealed everything. Endlessly unspooling and recoiling, the tide crashed onto the shoreline carrying driftwood and debris. And sometimes, a body.

Norman's body was heaved up onto the shore by a wave that started somewhere far away but ended up on Kata beach. The body was rigid with rigormortis. The face had become bloated while the skin seemed, by curious osmiosis, to assume the ethereal blue aspect of the sea. They were the same now. Enough of the ocean welled up inside of Norman's body to make them kindred. The waves washed over the lifeless limbs in endless succession. His hands were tethered and torn. The head bobbed up and down with the ministrations of the tide, as though he was coming up for a breath of air and then submerge again. Bubbles formed around the salt-cracked lips each time the face pressed through the surface, as if the body wanted to reveal its secret. And then they burst. His brow was blistered and baked by the sun. His eyes had been plucked out by sea eagles.

The team of FBI investigators looked conspicuously out of place at Chalong police station. They came to make a power point presentation at the request of the American embassy in Bangkok. Only the presence of three dark coloured four-wheel drives in the car park of the police station indicated that there were special visitors inside the station. Savvas had only seen para-military personnel attached to royal motorcades driving vehicles like these. Savvas was asked to attend a session of the presentation along with other foreign staff

at the university. The investigators hoped that someone might have information about the last days in the life of Norman Black.

The sober introduction to the event was made by a representative of the embassy. This was followed by information on the team of investigators and their objective. Six investigators in total with experience in forensics, homicide and psychological profiling addressed the group of attendees for several hours. The death of Norman Black came at an inconvenient time for the American administration. Over the previous few weeks the American and Thai governments had been negotiating a new contentious trade agreement. The newspapers in the United States had been running stories about Muslim insurrections in the south of Thailand. Norman's death had come to represent a casualty of the perception that American expatriates in Thailand were the objects of political persecution. In the mainstream press he was characterised as a Christian missionary who may have been murdered by Muslim extremists.

The presentation included a detailed personal biography. There was something that caught Savvas' interest - Norman's service during the Vietnam war took him to Thailand in 1969 when he was stationed at an airbase in Udon Thani, a large town near the border of Thailand

and Laos. He was responsible for loading bombs onto aircraft that would conduct bombing raids over Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. More than fifty-six jets carrying sixteen hundred pound bombs on their wings and more on the fuselage flew off the base in Udon Thani, each day and flew to Laos where they released their devastating load.

Meanwhile, Richard Nixon was stating categorically that America was not bombing Laos. The Central Intelligence Agency was dissembling without restraint. Field agents were unknowingly collecting intelligence that was created as misinformation by other parts of the agency. This data was transmitted to Washington where it was used to formulate strategic decisions in the war against communism. Spiralling misinformation fuelled paranoia and fear and created a culture of collusion and conspiracy.

Savvas reflected that Norman was in Thailand in 1969 because of aggressive American foreign policy in the region. It was deemed by the American government to be in the interests of national security for America to be thwarting the expansion of Communism in south-east Asia. More than 35 years later Norman returned to the same place to, ostensibly, teach English. At the university it was Norman's agenda to do more than teach English. He was

trying to impose his value system on passive Thai students. While Norman was acting as an individual, disturbingly, there were thousands of Mormon missionaries doing the same thing throughout Thailand. Additionally, there were more Evangelical Christian groups church planting in Northern Thailand than anywhere else in the world. Many of these groups were enjoying direct financial support from the government of the United States.

At the conclusion of the presentation reporters from the island gazette probed the FBI investigators for more information. It wasn't clear whether the death was an accident or a homicide. It was established that the cause of death was drowning but the investigators could not dismiss the possibility that a third party may have murdered Norman. It seemed that Norman went swimming to Kata beach often. However, there were no personal affects on the beach to suggest he went to Kata to swim. It was also not clear where he was swimming as the body could have been carried from anther part of the coast. Several teachers from the university grouped together to discuss the presentation. Kane Lambin was conspicuously errant. An investigator went to the group and asked for Savvas. Savvas was invited to help the investigators with more questions as he worked closely with Norman. He was invited into another room where

one officer asked him questions while several others observed from another room.

'How well did you know him?'

"Not well enough to kill him."

"I'm sorry. The purpose of this interview is simply to help build a detailed psychological profile on Norman Black. There is no intention to question you with the object of investigating you as a suspect."

"Fine."

"Did you work with him?"

"Yes."

"When did you see him last?"

"About three days ago."

"What did you talk about?"

"The perfection in the symmetry of fate. This was a paradox to Norman and me. It was always a moot point

between us. Were our lives subject to benevolent or malevolent forces?"

"Pardon?"

"You know, just academic matters."

"Oh, I see. And did you see him argue with anyone at the university?"

"Only himself," I said with a wry smile.

"What does that mean?"

"Norman was a man of many conflicts. He was an intense, self-absorbed intellectual."

"Did he have any enemies?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Did he drink, gamble or use drugs?"

"He just drank socially, I believe."

The questions continued until Savvas was simply helping the FBI officer to furnish the description of the life of an expatriate teacher at the university. Human figures and landscape. Like an artist's rendering. This exercise was self-fulfilling. It served the interests of procedural truth impeccably. Like the blanks following questions on a page, Savvas' answers filled the police statement with enough contextual detail about Norman for the police to discharge their responsibility while not really learning anything. Except, of course, what the questions invited.

This was the great deception of Western linear thinking, Savvas thought. We only get answers to questions that we ask. What about answers to questions not asked? What about answers to questions which cannot be formulated into words? Words, after all, were only symbolic registers of meaning. Each person invests words with their own meaning. This was the realm that Norman inhabited.

"Did he have any enemies?"

"I don't know."

"Did you like him?"

"He was my professional colleague. We worked

together on many projects and cooperated to serve the students at the university."

"Yes, Ok. But did you like him?"

"Do you mean did we get along? Well sure. We helped each other with our teaching responsibilities andshared our ideas." The police officer was not satisfied with Savvas' prevarication. His tone was increasingly more intolerant. "Did you like him as a person? "What was the feeling between you like?"

"Well, he was ok. You know what it's like. So many ex-pat teachers come and go. You don't get a chance to get to know anyone deeply." Savvas was doing his best to avoid the question. His feelings for Norman would have been condemning. As an expatriate abroad Savvas often chose to act with impunity when his interests were threatened. After all, he rationalised, he was in a foreign country where the legal traditions and moral framework was alien to him. He was in a no-man's land where he could choose to invoke a moral code or simply inhabit a world without boundaries. Norman chose to live within that moral dominion while Savvas was more expedient with these matters.

"I understand you had lodged a complaint about him to the head of the department."

"Yes. That's right."

"Well, would that show you did not like him?"

"No. Not necessarily. It's just that he behaved in a way that was unacceptable to me."

"What did he do?"

"He threatened me."

"How did he threaten you?"

"Verbally."

"What did he say?"

"He said that I lacked integrity."

"How was his behaviour threatening?"

"He walked towards me stopping just a centimetre from me. He glared at me and told me that I did not deserve to be treated like a colleague."

"Eyeball to eyeball."

"Yes, eyeball to eyeball."

"Were you afraid?"

"Not for my physical well being. I knew that I would not be provoked into a fight. However, I was seething that he had the arrogance to stand over me and with those heavy-lidded crescent eyes and intimidate him."

"Were there any witnesses?"

"No. It happened in the corridor between classes."

"Did he touch you?"

"No. He was more intrusive. He stood close enough for Savvas to feel his breath on his face. This was more provocative than a physical assault could ever have been."

"What do you mean?"

"He was judging me! He was playing God," Savvas said indignantly. At this point it was clear to the officer that Savvas was incensed at what had happened. Savvas

could see the officer evaluating his emotional intensity. It was transparent that he was not just a dispassionate associate of Norman Black. It was obvious he was emotionally involved. This was incriminating. Savvas had to subdue his feelings before the officer developed his own conclusions.

"I just don't like people to impose their value systems on me. He was a missionary. You know what they can be like. Self-righteous and opinionated. I just don't like someone else driving their brand of salvation down my throat."

"Yes. There are many missionaries in Thailand."

"It is presumptuous to say the least. It's not enough that they befriend you with a self-serving agenda in mind but they also disguise their zealotry with friendship or collegial fellowship. They are imposters! Frauds!" In the nineteenth century they travelled to Africa and South America to impose themselves and their beliefs on the indigenous populations. They invested money in redeveloping roads and ports and hospitals to facilitate their agenda of enlarging their congregations.

"Thailand no longer needs assistance to develop its infrastructure."

"Nowadays the same groups are more subtle. Their agendas are largely the same but their stratagems are different. While still assisting local communities with developing infrastructure the new focus of support is in influencing the superstructure."

"What is the superstructure?"

"The superstructure is the intellectual capital of the society - the curriculums of universities and schools, the content of newspapers, radio and television programs, usurping the role of government by establishing NGOs and influencing domestic political agendas by invoking international trade embargoes and sanctions."

"The Christian message is one of peace and love, is it not?

"Of course it is. But since when do you have to manipulate someone into doing something that is good for them? People are well attuned to what their needs are. We are an evolving species. We adapt. We don't need others to tell us what is good for us."

"Sometimes people need guidance and support. Especially if they lack education or come from disadvantaged environments."

"People are like plants. You can't pull them and their roots out of the ground and plonk them down elsewhere. You can't even plant them in a foreign environment without significant risk of dying. This is the nature of things. We all have roots that extend beyond our lifetime and our parent's lifetime. There is an intricate psychological thread that connects us to our forebears. And more importantly, connects us to their unique environments and experiences. This thread is an integral part of a great tapestry that is our life. Pull this thread out and the tapestry unravels. The tableau that is our life changes irrevocably. These are threads of fate and chance."

"I think I understand. The Buddhists say that their experience in this life is determined by how they behaved in the previous life. What they experience in the next life is determined by what they do in this life."

"That's right. The Buddhists call these connections Karma. The Christians refer to the conscience. I think these connections just are. They are part of the natural order of things. They are beyond definition or categorisation. As human beings we have a tendency to label things. We understand the world around us by putting words on what we capture with our five senses. These words are symbols only and subject to interpretation. We freeze the known world into ideologies, denominations, and

intellectual traditions. What is essentially human becomes a fossil. The human race is like the woolly mammoth frozen forever in an iceberg. It is only is childhood that we see the world clearly. The wonder of staring at starry sky, the perfection of a rainbow after it rains, the afternoon shadow stretching across the meadow to where the sun rises. Children see the world without words. It opens up to them in a way that adults have closed forever."

"How did Norman Black view the world?"

"Norman had a Messiah complex. He was delusional. He believed he was chosen to fulfil a holy mission. He actually inferred meaning from the fact that his birthdate was, coincidentally, the same date the Education Reform Act of Thailand was passed. He saw some sort of cosmic symmetry in this and accepted it as a mandate to impose his pedagogical philosophy and methodologies on students at universities where he worked."

"Really? That sounds absurd. Was he serious about this?"

"Serious enough to threaten me when he recognised I was not going to become one of his acolytes."

"He sounds disturbed. Did any of your other colleagues recognise his strange behaviour?"

"Over time others in the faculty also found themselves in conflict with Norman Black. It was inevitable. He was a sociopath in some respects. He was excessively charming and ingratiating to the point of obsequiousness with new faculty members. He had a knack of being able to identify the socio-economic background of new teachers and then tailor his conversations to present himself as sharing the same values as his target. His command of English was excellent while his familiarity with the idioms of different social groups was used with astonishing talent to finesse and persuade. He was a dangerous man."

"Dangerous to himself it seems."

"Indeed. If he was to describe his gruesome death he would have probably called it comeuppance."

"He deserved to die then?"

"He was interfering with the natural order of things. You cannot do this without consequences."

"Didn't Norman Black also ascribe meaning to the

events in our lives? Didn't he also believe in destiny?"

"Norman believed in a metaphysical world. He believed that events were ordained by a spiritual force. He saw untold meaning in coincidences, serendipitous occurrences, and accidents. He saw them all as part of an overarching design that was conceived by an otherworldly being. For Norman Black the world of empiricism was riddled with conflicts and contradictions."

"And how do you see it then?"

"There are no conflicts and contradictions. There are just different perspectives. The world around us is subject to interpretation by each individual. Naturally, each individual sees things differently. This is what Norman would have identified as a contradiction. In fact, every personal view is quite valid. When you look at things this way you will see there are no conflicts, just different perspectives."

"And what about destiny? What determines a person's destiny in your view?'

"Everyone's life is a juggernaught - Genetic inheritance and environment, including the social, economic and political context - are all rolled up into one and pushed

forward by an ancestral breath of life. Time provides momentum while the natural world is the landscape for our journey."

"So there is little choice then in our lives?"

"The momentum of the juggernaught is supreme. The choices that we make are really invalid as they are choices between limited, preordained options. After all, we cannot choose an option that is not presented to us. We can only choose what we can recognise and that, of course, is determined by genetics and environment."

"And God. How does he fit into all of this?"

"As a human being I am not equipped to know. I have no cognisance of mataphysics because I am only capable of observing the temporal world using five senses. The fact that the question occurs is a matter of epistemology rather thar empiricism. There is undeniably a lot more going on in this universe than we can perceive with five senses. However, is it our role to know? We act as though it is a sacred prerogative to ask questions pertaining to the dominions beyond our own. We do not. This is arrogant. We are simply expressing restlessness that is a characteristic of the human condition. We murmur

about the direction of our lives. Many say they have the answers to these eternal questions. They are frauds. Unless they are equipped with more than five senses they know no more than the rest of us."

"Norman Black was a fraud then."

"Well, he certainly must have done something wrong, because he has ended up dead. Murder or accidental death, what is the difference? A man is dead and whether it was at the hands of another human being or because of some natural force is unimportant - aren't we all part of the flora and fauna? Isn't it just simply a reflection of the gestalt?"

"Thank you for your time. I will transcribe the interview and submit it to the investigating team. Please remain in town for the time being. We may need to call on you again. I hope you understand. The matter is now in the hands of the American embassy."

"Yes, of course. I would be happy to cooperate with your investigation. Somehow I feel I am part of the process of restoring the balance that was disrupted by Norman Black."

"While his attorneys don't see it that way I'm certainly pleased to have your cooperation. Thank you."

Chapter Seventeen

October was a month of great change on the island. The monsoon season was ending and the dry season was about to begin. The torrential rains that harried the surface of the ocean and flooded the ravines and escarpments were easing. The waterfalls in the mountains dried up creating hardened creek beds that illegal Burmese workers used as tracks to reach their makeshift sanctuaries by night. The emerald-green hue that covered the island like moss during the wet season slowly faded. The new season's flooding sunlight stained the leaves and grass with brimstone yellow washing away the bold and vivid colours of the monsoon.

The high, thick jungle canopies were thinning allowing the sunlight to rake the shaded undergrowth of

fallen leaves with rays of light. Thousands of butterflies, cocooned during the monsoon, were spawned amidst the bristling ambrosial thickets, floating effortlessly like coloured snowflakes. Each would take its own path, migrating across the island as if they were following the map of intricate lines, shapes and shades of colour embossed on their wings. The rarest species of butterfly on the island, the Blue Ulysses, would embark on its epic journey to find the precious nectar of flowers it needed to survive. Most would perish before sunset. Sometimes, a solitary butterfly would reach a wild orchid only to die on the luxurious petals of its purple-cloaked embrace.

Savvas' routine had changed considerably after Norman's death. Kane was left alone in the old office occupied by Norman and Savvas while Savvas relocated into another office. Prisana had resigned from the university as she had planned to do since the previous year. It represented the culmination of ten meritorious years of service to the university as a senior academic and administrator. She was now seeking a more contemplative lifestyle in her hometown where she would also be able to spend more time with her aged parents. Her parents village, Nongpakjig, was approximately one hours drive east from the university where she was offered an appointment as a lecturer in the School of Liberal Arts as a language teacher. She also expressed

an interest in developing her own style as a painter away from the reproductions she had been doing to some original work.

In the months leading up to Prisana's departure from Phuket, Savvas saw more of Prisana and the relationship seemed to flourish. They spent more time together at work getting to know each other. After work they shared intimate moments in Prisana's apartment during the week and at Savvas' mountain bungalow in Kata on the weekends. Prisana made it clear to Savvas that she wanted him to relocate to Chiang Rai to develop the relationship further with the object of eventually living together and having a family. She proposed that both of them secure appointments at Chiang Rai University, a prominent educational institution located in the lower Mekong delta near Chiang Rai.

Savvas was always haunted by the idea that Prisana may not have been genuine towards him and was insecure about her motives for presenting herself as being in love with him. After all, Savvas thought, a few months before she met him she was imploring another man - an Italian teacher - to share his life with her. Was it possible for her to fall in love again so quickly? If she wasn't genuine then what was her real reason for saying she was in love? Her character was also in doubt as she had to

craft elaborate lies to maintain the elaborate deception of seeing Georgio without Madeleine learning of the relationship. Moreover, she continued to see Georgio even after Madeleine confronted them about the illicit affair.

By November the investigation into Norman Black's death was found to be inconclusive. The fact that Norman was formerly a Mormon and because of a request from his family the authorities were precluded from conducting thorough autopsy on the body. Lack of circumstantial evidence and motive thwarted the formulation of any suggestion that he was murdered by someone known to him. The interview with Savvas established that there was a high level of overt antipathy between Norman and Savvas but nothing to suggest Savvas would be provoked or motivated by other reasons to kill him. Kane and Savvas never spoke about the death at all. As Savvas had relocated offices they rarely crossed paths again and when they did Kane assumed a disdainful distance from him.

At the request of the department head the student examination that was the subject of the cheating scandal was set again. Savvas' students performed exceptionally well, again, while the exam results for Kane and Norman's students were lacklustre. It was evident to Savvas that Prisana did a great deal in helping him to overcome

the challenge to his position at the university. She was able to appraise the department head of the machinations in the office between Norman, Kane and himself and spare Savvas any injury to his reputation with the university that would arise if he was disciplined or became the subject of an official inquiry. Prisana and Ajarn Benjawan were close and trusted friends.

In December, Prisana and Savvas drove away from Kata where they had packed their belongings into Savvas' Caribean jeep. Savvas agonised over the decision to resign from the university in Phuket and drive to Chiang Rai with Prisana for weeks. Savvas was at best ambivalent about Prisana and concluded that relocating would give him more of an opportunity to learn about her and himself. They would drive from Phuket to Bangkok and from Bangkok to Chiang Rai.

Chapter Eighteen

The road trip away from Phuket was a catalyst of change. Driving north along the western peninsula of Phuket they crossed the Sarisin Bridge onto mainland Thailand. Every fifty kilometres they encountered military checkpoints where they were stopped and searched. From that point the road signs were all in Thai while the rural landscape was unaffected by malignant commercialism or its images. The long meandering road reached up into the hinterland of Thailand like a naturally formed gully shaded by the verdant foliage of sub-tropical vegetation. Pineapples for sale by the roadside by farmers at two Baht each were indicative of the cost of living and the level of economic activity in the region. The ambient light soon fell as they entered the shadow-lands beneath the canopy of Khao Lak National Park, a

multi-generational rain forest with towering trees and arcane ferns lunging forward over the road like gigantic prehistoric dinosaurs

Eight hundred kilometres south of Bangkok. "You have never told me much about your mother and father Savvas. They are Greek?"

"Greek-Cypriot actually. Cyprus is a small island in the Mediterranean sea."

"You were born in Australia though."

"Yes, Melbourne."

"When did your parents migrate?"

"1956. My father was in Australia earlier, in 1952 I think, and returned to be introduced to my mother."

"A proxy marriage?"

"Well, actually it was more of an introduction to see if they liked each other."

"Evidently they did."

"My father came out on a ship called the Oronsay. He sailed with several friends whom he'd known since he was a small boy in the seaside port town of Paphos."

"It must have been a long journey by ship."

"The ship took stopped at several ports along the way but its

course was largely set to be followed without digression. Like our lives, some people say."

"And they have been married since?"

"Sure have. They may attribute the longevity of their relationship to other reasons but I think they were following the values of that epoch. They argue all the time."

"They love each other?"

"I don't know. What do you mean by love? They share a companionate love but certainly no lingering romantic affection."

"Companionate love?"

"You know - caring for each other, mutual understanding and respect, compromise, devotion, compassion."

"Were they ever in love?"

"If they were it was shattered when my father betrayed my mother."

"Betrayed your mother?"

"In 1962 my mother's younger sister arrived from Cyprus to stay in Melbourne while my mother sought prospective suitors for her to be married to. It was customary those days for Greek-Australians to marry other Greek-Australians. Anyway, she stayed with them living in the same house. My father and my mother's younger sister formed an illicit relationship which was eventually revealed and devastated my mother."

"Your mother must have been deeply hurt Savvas. How did she cope with her life after that?"

"I don't know. I only know that my brother and I are products of their union consummated several years after the affair."

"Did they talk about it when you were growing up?"

"I sometimes heard my mother refer to it in anger when she was arguing with my father. By the time my brother and I were teenagers we had heard them insult each other often enough that we had a fairly good idea of what transpired in 1962."

"Did your father ever discuss it with you?"

"Not directly, at least not when I was younger. My mother had eventually poured her heart out to me and my brother when we were older and my father eventually referred openly to it as a mistake he deeply regretted."

"And yet they remained together?"

"Well, the relationship would have fundamentally changed after that. The breach of trust was so great for my mother that she would never trust anyone again after that. She said to me once that she could forgive, as a good Christian but she, regrettably, could never forget. Her relationship with her younger sister was tragically unstable for years, sometimes bitter and acrimonious and other times understanding and sympathetic."

Seven hundred kilometres south of Bangkok. "You were involved with a married woman once too, weren't you Savvas?"

"That was a long time ago. I had just graduated from university and had been unemployed. Mum and dad went abroad for six months. We had new neighbours - a family of four. The husband worked during the day and his wife only part time. I developed a friendship with her that created the circumstances for us to start sleeping together. I believe her motivation would have been different from mine but perversely the affair fulfilled usboth."

"How long did it last?"

"About seven months. It was intense. We saw each other every day. After all, she lived directly across the road from our house."

"Her husband never suspected anything?"

"Well, I don't really know. He was outraged at the suggestion that we were involved made by my mother when she uncovered the relationship on her return from overseas. However, he always refused to accept it was true suggesting that it was scurrilous slander."

"She must have been very convincing to her husband."

"Strangely, during the affair she used to record the times we had sexual intercourse on a wall calendar in her kitchen. She recorded the days in secretarial shorthand so that it would be unintelligible to her family."

"How did you feel towards her Savvas?"

"It began as a sexual obsession with an older, seductive woman. When she visited my mother she radiated a raw sexuality that I picked up on. We both knew there was a drive to press our fleshtogether. It was only a matter of time and opportunity."

"Did you fall in love with her?"

"The obsession was consuming. I experienced nauseating jealousy of anyone else she may have been seeing. I felt the imminent threat of betrayal all the time she was not with me. I could never understand why this was important to me. After all she was a married woman I was having an affair with. It was not logical that I develop a proprietorial interest in her."

"She wasn't your wife Savvas."

"Right. It was not appropriate that I should have felt anxious and insecure about her at all. However, I was agonising over her for a long time. I can see in hindsight that my body was giving me warning signals about the relationship."

"How could you trust her when you were confronted by her treachery everyday."

"Of course. And if the relationship was to grow into something more and enjoy a defacto status it would be riddled with insecurity. It quite simply would not be in my interests to be involved with her. The fears about her betraying me were probably irrational as she spent all of her time with me when she was not with her husband and family. Curiously, those irrational fears saved me from viewing the relationship as anything more than an extra-marital affair."

Six hundred kilometres from Bangkok. "And what about you Prisana, who was your first love?"

"When I was in college I had a Thai boyfriend. We were very close. I was involved with him while I undertook my studies for three years and for about four

years after I graduated and was working at the university."

"That sounds like a Thai marriage to me."

"No, we were not even engaged. We were very young."

"After the Thai man?"

"Well, I had an American boyfriend for about two and a half years."

"Was he a teacher?"

"Yes. We met at the university in Phuket."

"Why did it end?"

"We saw each other at the university for six months. He then went back to the States to do some postgraduate studies. We communicated for two more years before we saw it was impractical to continue."

"Did you visit him?"

"I flew to Hawaii for four weeks where he was

doing his studies."

"And him? Did he visit you?"

"Once when I was completing my Masters program in Bangkok. He stayed for ten days."

"And after Jeff, was there another?"

"No. Only my mistake with Georgio."

"Why do you characterise it as a mistake?"

"Because he was the wrong man. I chose the wrong man."

"Did you love him?"

"No, not love. It just happened. It was a sort of chemistry I suppose."

"You certainly risked a lot."

"It was a time in my life I have wanted to forget."

"And you still claim you didn't sleep together."

"That's right."

"Hard to believe. How did you restrain yourselves?"

"We knew it was wrong Savvas. It wasn't like you think - a dirty thing. Georgio was actually a good man especially compared to Kane Lambin."

"Someone had mentioned to me that you spent time in Krabi. Stayed overnight?"

"Yeah. I was going there for the day and thought he might enjoy it. I invited him to come along and he ended up getting sick so we stayed overnight."

"Together?"

"No."

"I mean were you in the same room?"

"Well, yes but that's because most other places were fully booked."

"So you were together then?"

"We didn't sleep together. He was on the floor and I was on the bed."

"Really. We drove through Krabi a while ago. It looks like a very romantic place - beaches, sunset."

"Yes."

"I find it difficult to believe that you two didn't make the most of it while you were here."

"He had a girlfriend Savvas. We both knew that."

Five hundred Kilometres from Bangkok. "Do you confuse me with the bar girls you associated with in Phuket?"

"No."

"Well, you seem to think that I am the sort of person who slept around a lot."

"I didn't say that."

"You suggest it each time you ask me about my past."

"I'm sorry. I just have no way of knowing who you were before we met."

"Is that important?"

"Well, how you behaved in the past is the only evidence I have that will tell me something about your character. I really have not known you very long and I feel uncomfortable with the fact that we are travelling to your home town with the object of deepening this relationship."

"I think you have pre-judged me."

"How?"

"You have allowed Kane Lambin to contaminate your view of me even before we met. You are prejudiced."

"I appreciate Kane had reasons to say some of the things he did."

"Then why do you pre-judge me?"

"I am a foreigner in Thailand. I have been exposed to so much in Phuket. I saw many of my friends be

deceived and defrauded by Thai women - working girls and non-working girls. I haven't had a lot of time to get to know you, I suppose."

"I am financially independent. I have never asked you for money. It would be an insult for me to take a handout from you."

"Perhaps you want a better life in Australia? Perhaps you are just enamoured with a Western lifestyle?

"I am proud of being Thai. I resent the arrogance of foreigners from the West who presume I want what they have. I am not interested in a superficial life of materialism in a developed country. I would much prefer to live a simple life in Thailand eating food wrapped in banana leaves not plastic bags."

"Would marrying a foreigner represent a passport to study abroad?"

"My employer would be happy to send me off to complete a Doctorate abroad. I don't need your help."

"Sure, but wouldn't you have to return and work an equal amount of years with the same employer as a way of repaying the debt?"

"Yes, but that is accepted as normal here."

Four hundred kilometres from Bangkok. "I'm sorry about making you feel uncomfortable Prisana. I just don't want to be the token foreigner in a relationship. I want to feel and believe that you want me to be part of your life because of who I really am not what I may represent financially or culturally."

"I want to have a family with you Savvas. I think we have a lot in common. I don't want you because you are a foreigner."

"Foreigners are regarded as outsiders in Thai society. How is it you find it acceptable to form a relationship with me?"

"I take people as individuals Savvas. Also, I do not have as much in common with my contemporaries. I feel like an outsider in my own culture. The things that I appreciate are obscure to other Thai people. I paint and read novels - in Thai and English - and have a fondness for evocative and eclectic music."

"Ok. All I am saying is that if you are the person you say you are then I agree that we are very compatible. However, I am still getting to know you. I really don't

know who you are yet."

"Savvas, I am the person you have seen all along and over time you will see that. If I were pretending to be someone else the mask would eventually fall one day. Nobody can hold onto a mask forever."

"And you would be disappointed if you were pretending to be someone else and had an ulterior motive. I really have no money Prisana."

"Equally Savvas, if I wanted to embezzle money from somebody why would I waste my time with you? There were many wealthy foreigners in Phuket who would have been soft targets for that."

Three hundred kilometres from Bangkok. "Do you love me Savvas?"

"I don't have a lot of faith in romantic love. So many people form relationships based on strong feelings for each other only to betray, hurt or neglect each other in the future."

"What do you believe in then Savvas?"

"I thing a stronger foundation is companionate love."

"Yes, but that would only develop over time."

"Sure."

"Well, are you going to give this relationship time?"

"Of course. Sometimes though I do get very anxious about trusting you and I struggle to come to terms with that."

"I think you would have difficulty trusting any woman in a relationship."

"Why do you say that?"

"You have seen the worst in people Savvas. Your were involved with a married woman and your father betrayed your mother."

"Extra-marital affairs are not uncommon. Either are dysfunctional relationships. Everyone is exposed to these issues through popular culture and personal experience. They probably don't have the same challenges I am having now. I think it has a closer connection to you."

"I'm sure most people would regard my past - including my mistake with Georgio - as quite normal for a

single, thirty-two year old woman."

"I understand that to be true but I do get a strong intuitive feeling about you that is paralysing sometimes. I can't explain it. I just know it is intense. I don't think I would have the same fear with other women. I do feel it relates to you specifically."

"If it is a fear that was created by the things you heard about me then it can be overcome. However, if it is a belief about me then beliefs cannot be changed."

"I have a belief that people's characters don't change over time. People keep doing the same things over and over again. Sometimes their actions are self-destructive - drinking, abuse, addictions, personality disorders and unique characteristics - but they just can't help themselves. They are satisfying a profound need."

"And you fear that I will make the same mistake I made with Georgio again with someone else?"

"Yes, I suppose. Perhaps you are vulnerable to being propositioned or you are excessively romantic."

"If people's character's don't change then your father cheated on your mother more than once. Are you

willing to accept that your father lied again and again to your mother? Is he so bad? And can we say that because you had an affair with a married woman you will do it again?"

"I see your point."

"I don't think you would get involved with another married woman Savvas and I wouldn't make the same mistake twice. I learned a lot about life from my mistake with Georgio."

"I'm sorry. I just don't know what it is. I hope time will tell."

"I just hope you can endure the anguish of your fears Savvas until the day you see me, really see me and open your heart."

"It will either work out or it won't. Events will take their own course. That I know for certain."

Two hundred kilometres from Bangkok. "Savvas, do you think that you are just looking for excuses."

"What do you mean?"

"Looking for reasons not to be in this relationship. When you can't find anything you imagine the worst about me."

"Perhaps. It's a good question - how far do we, as human beings, project our own fears and beliefs onto others. And is that behaviour motivated by self-interest or self-destruction? I have recognised a desire in myself to want to find something damning about you. I feel that I just accept any positive revelations or insights about you without really weighing them in the balance. On the other hand I place undue importance on anything negative I observe or feel."

"People who are in love are usually blind to their partners imperfections."

"That's true. In some curious way the overwhelming feeling of being in love facilitates the biological imperative to reproduce. Nature's trick to guarantee the survival of the species."

"What does that mean?"

"Rational people would probably never commit to each other because they are aware of each others faults. They would also be mindful of the high percentage of

relationships that self-destruct in all cultures. As a result few people would get married and produce babies."

Chapter Nineteen

Twenty kilometres from Bangkok. The sweeping skyline bled into the horizon until all vestiges of the temporal world vanished completely. In the foreground there was a sprawling landscape of houses, apartment complexes, rooftops, water towers, a temple and trees. Monks chanted and occasionally, the dry crackle of a motorbike punctuated their incantation. In December the foliage was richly green and fertile after the recent rains. The nearby super-highway glittered with automobiles. From a distance they looked like small shiny pebbles moving along in a stream. The nearby temple dome was arcane. The gilded tiles were cracked and falling off. The flaky gold paint was peeling in the baking sun. Temple walls were fractured and had fallen into rubble.

Rising like great totemic poles, the corporate signage of Isuzu and Toyota soared above the din of traffic on the super-highway. The omnipresent 7-eleven sign eclipsed a Christian mission church cross. The Siam Commercial Bank sign rose so high with scaffolding latticework that it appeared as a blot in the sky. The three-sided logo of the bank resembled a new constellation in a strange new-world order of corporate zodiacs. These were the new deities of emerging Thailand, Savvas thought and Thai people paid homage to them when they drove along the super-highway.

Bangkok was a crucible of bloated capitalism. The concrete overpass carried the car over the steaming, toxic undercurrent of car exhaust fumes, above the electronic din of mobile telecommunications and the existential angst of thousands of commuters downtown. Food vendors crowded the pavements with their dilapidated jalopies pushed onto the road by the white, zoot-suited colonel of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Under the golden arches of McDonalds a delinquent generation was exposed to a combination of rapacious consumerism, corporate corpulence and the cultural imperialism of the West.

The steel gauntlet of billboards along the overpass promised unlimited credit on almost any amount of money, whiter, younger skin and better English in the ominous

shadow of a polluted sky. These immortal images were everywhere reflecting, reproducing and recycling the notion that everyone was going to live forever. This was the neon consciousness of post-modern Bangkok - there was no money in reminding people that they were all slowly dying. Image had become reality, as people remained beguiled by reflections of constructed meaning. Political slogans made plaintive promises about reducing corruption to zero, regulating traffic congestion and decentralising political power to benefit regional provinces. A malfunctioning traffic signal light flashed yellow - travel with caution - to Savvas' Suzuki Caribean jeep as it drove through a treacherous intersection.

Two hundred kilometres north of Bangkok. "The house is nearly complete now."

"It's a traditional Thai styled house made of wood?"

"On stilts."

"How far is it from your family home?"

"About three hundred feet. It can be seen through the trees from my family home."

"Who owns it?"

"Well my father has presented it to my late brother's son. He has a wife and they are currently living with her family but will relocate into the old house in about five years."

"Whose name is the title in?"

"My father's name - but it now belongs to my nephew. My father hasn't followed up on having the name on the title changed."

"Your nephew and his wife have no objection to us occupying the house in the immediate future?"

"No, not at all. The old house was derelict for almost twenty years. They had no plans to move in."

"It must have needed some renovating?"

"Quite a lot. Dozens of friends and relatives have helped to clean, paint, and renovate it for us. In fact, as many of them are tradesmen, we have been able to replace the roof tiles completely and construct a Western-styled toilet - for you."

"Really?"

"They mixed around twenty bags of cement to build an external toilet attached to a rear patio. They also rebuilt a crumbling flight of stairs leading up to a kitchenette."

"Is it furnished?

"We have transferred the furniture out of my old bedroom in my family home including a bed, desk, chairs and a wardrobe amongst other things."

"Hot water?"

"We installed a hot water system last week."

"You and your family have gone to a lot of trouble to make us comfortable."

"Savvas, my family would do anything for me. They know that I love you and want to have a family with you. They embrace you as part of our family now."

"I'm starting to feel guilty about doubting your sincerity. I hope you understand I am doing my best to struggle with my fears. I don't invent them to hurt you or create anguish in my own life. I am afflicted by them as I would be afflicted by symptoms of an illness. I regret the symptoms sometimes injure you."

"Its OK Savvas. I know you are fighting this. That proves that you do care. I will help you when you are weak."

Four hundred kilometres north of Bangkok. "How long has it been since you spoke to your parents Savvas?"

"A year and a half."

"Did you leave Australia on good terms?"

"No, not really."

"Why don't you call them? See how they are."

"It's been a long time."

"They would be so happy to hear from you."

"I'm sure my mother would simply insult me for being abroad for so long. She never really understood me. She just wanted to impose her values and ambitions onto me rather than taking me as a unique human being."

"She's your mother Savvas. She hurts to see you absent for so long."

"I wouldn't know how to begin."

"Just say hello and tell them you are ok."

"What time is it now?"

"About midday."

"So it would be about four in the afternoon in Australia."

"Would they be home?"

"Sure. They are retired now."

"Ok. Then."

"It'll be ok. Trust me Savvas."

"Do you want me to dial the number?"

"I can do it.... Hello, mum?"

"Hello Savvas. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you and dad?"

"We're ok. We miss you very much. Where are you calling from?"

"I'm driving to Chiang Rai, a town in Northern

Thailand."

"You have left Phuket?"

"Yes, I have been offered work at a university in Chiang Rai teaching English."

"How is your health?"

"Great. I was bedevilled by some tropical maladies while living in Phuket but managed to survive."

"When will you return to Australia?"

"I will see if I can fly back for a short holiday before the start of the first semester."

"That would be great. Your brother's sons are growing very quickly. Mathew is six and Nathan and Timothy are about eighteen months. When are you going to settle down?"

"I'm seeing someone now. In fact we are travelling together to her home town in Chiang Rai. Her name is Prisana. She is a teacher."

"We would be delighted to meet her. Please

express our well wishes to her."

"They would be well deserved. It was with her encouragement that I rang today."

"Your father wants to say a few words Savvas."

"Hi dad, are you well?"

"Yes Savvas. How are you? When will you visit us?"

"I'm fine. As I said to mum, if I can I would like to visit before I start teaching in April."

"You know you can return and resume your life here just as you left it."

"Sure, but I still have a few things to explore here."

"Have you been teaching?"

"Yes, in Phuket at a university. I resigned from there a few days ago and am relocating to northern Thailand to teach at a university in a small town."

"Can you write all the details to us? And send

photos."

"Sure, I will."

"Your mother wants to say goodbye."

"Thanks."

"It was so good to hear from you Savvas. We look forward to receiving your letter. Take care of yourself and best wishes to Prisana."

"Thanks mum. Bye."

"How do you feel Savvas?"

"Something has changed. I can't describe it but I feel very different."

"You were very courageous Savvas."

"It feels like I have resolved a conflict that was infecting my whole being."

"That's what family means Savvas. We cannot remain estranged from those we love and who love us,

indefinitely. It' not natural."

Ten kilometres from Nongpakjig, Chiang Rai. Savvas and Prisana talked and laughed a lot on the way as the car coasted along the highway. They were in their own world now, a world of companionship, understanding, respect and love. They were planning a family. The landscape outside was a blur of colours and shapes. Both of them had their vision focussed on the road ahead. There were a few road signs and landmarks that Savvas observed in his peripheral vision but they were not in the foreground anymore. They seemed to come and go in his field of vision without consequence. Savvas was now navigating using an internal landscape of emotions and feelings.

The clutter and clamour of the world of the superhighway was quickly receding behind them. Prisana recognised the point on the highway when they would have to make a right hand turn to take the small, unsurfaced road to Nongpakjig. It was unmarked and there were no landmarks to make the point more familiar. There was just the slight rise in the highway following the gradient of the landscape before falling off again. Somehow, they just knew where to turn. Savvas geared down methodically and carefully slowed the car.

A serendipitous turn from the highway, between the forested mountain township of Prae and the sweeping outskirts of Chiang Rai, at an unmarked junction, the road spilled into a small, unsurfaced corollary glowing with a burning orange dust. Golden corn stalks, ablaze with colour like fiery torches, marked the periphery of green and yellow rice paddies. Water flowed slowly through narrow, man-made canals to verdant pastures. Open grasslands stretched towards the horizon. In the west, a mountain range overhung the lowlands like an imposing wall. Great swathes of land below were inter-woven like pieces of an immense tapestry. Rich bands of colour through the fields reflected the changing seasons. The road poured into the landscape like a river, constantly rising and falling over hills, crisscrossing hundreds of minor tributaries, through ravines and across fields to take Savvas to a place he never expected to find himself.